IDALIA.

IDALIA.

A Romance.

By OUIDA.

AUTHOR OF "STRATHMORE," "CHANDOS," ETC.

" Etês-vous mon démon ou mon ange ?
Je ne sais, mais je suis votre esclave."—VICTOR HUGO.

" Love, ——— not serenely pure
But strong from weakness like a chance-sown plant
Which, cast on stubborn soil, puts forth changed buds,
And softer strains unknown in happier climes."
ROBERT BROWNING.

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CONTENTS TO VOL. II.

CHAPTER I.

PAGE

"SHE SMILES THEM DOWN IMPERIALLY" 1

CHAPTER II.

THE ALLEGORY OF THE POMEGRANATE 31

CHAPTER III.

"MONSIGNORE" 68

CHAPTER IV.

"A TEMPLE NOT MADE WITH HANDS" 87

CHAPTER V.

"CRAVEST THOU ARCADY? BOLD IS THY CRAVING. I SHALL NOT CONTENT IT" 109

CHAPTER VI.

"THE LIGHT IN THE DUST LIES DEAD" 142

CHAPTER VII.

"MORE GREAT IN MARTYRDOM THAN THRONED AS CÆSAR'S MATE" 160

CHAPTER VIII.

PAGE

"THE DEVIL TEMPTED ME, AND I DID EAT" . . 183

CHAPTER IX.

THE CAPTIVE OF THE CHURCH 215

CHAPTER X.

"RIEN QUE TOI" 240

CHAPTER XI.

LION AND LEOPARD 286

IDALIA.

CHAPTER I.

"SHE SMILES THEM DOWN IMPERIALLY AS VENUS DID THE WAVES."

It was evening when the schooner ran into Capri, that Eden hung beneath the sea and sky. All its marvellous maze of colour was in its richest glow; the sun was sinking behind Solaro; the towering rocks of the Salto and the Faraglioni burned through their sublimity of gloom; a lustre of gold and purple streamed over mountainous Ischia down on the brow of Epomeneo, and over the low hills of Procida; and the blue water lay dazzling in the light, with the white sails of Sorrento skiffs scarce larger on its waves than the white wings of fluttering monachi, while over the sea came the odours of budding orange and citron gardens and a world of violets that filled the woods, sloping upward and upward into the clouds where Anacapri lay.

Erceldoune saw none of it, yet he felt it vaguely —felt, as his vessel steered through that flood of sunlight, coming from the rich *mezzo giorno* of the Amalfi coast into the golden riot of this lavish loveliness, as though he floated to a paradise. So had they thought before him, who, sailing through those caressing seas towards the same isles where the Syrens sang, had listened to the enchanted song to find their grave, in tumult and in storm.

The sun sank behind Ischia as he went ashore, and the sudden twilight fell, quenching all the blaze of fire, and bringing in its stead the tender night, with the chime of the Ave Maria ringing out from church bells over the sea.

He was known in Capri, and the men showed their white teeth with a bright smile, and the girls laughed all over their handsome brown faces, as they welcomed him.

He had little doubt of soon learning what he sought: a few brief questions brought him loquacious answers.

"'Niursi, signore!" cried a *marinaro*, in the barbarous Capriote patois. "L'illustrissima Contessa! she knows me well. Chiara, my wife, helped the African carry the luggage up to her villa the day before yesterday—— "

"She is here still?"

The quick Capriote caught the tremulous excitement that ran through the question, and his heart warmed to the stranger, by whom his brother had once been brought up from the black churning waves under Tiberio in the dead of a tempestuous night.

"She is here, signor mio; she has been often here. She is at the Villa Santilla, in the Piccola Marina. I will show you the way willingly."

"No, I can find it; I know every foot of your island. But if you can get me a horse, do."

The *marinaro* put back the gold held out to him with a loving gesture, and a smile that glistened through his brown beard:

"Not from *you*, signor. We have not forgotten, in Capri here, the night after San Costanza's Day."

Awhile later, and Erceldoune passed up the terraced heights, through the woods, where he crushed starry cyclomen and late violets at every step, along hedges of prickly pear enclosing vineyards and fields of flax, and down rocky winding stairs shut in by walls, over which hung the white blossoms of orange-boughs.

Now and then he passed a village priest, or a

contadina that was like a study for Giorgone, or a tourist party whose mules were stumbling down some narrow gorge or dense arbutus thicket; these were all; the solitude was well-nigh unbroken. He knew Capri as well as he knew the old Scottish border at home; many a time, waiting week after week at Naples for despatches, he had explored every creek, rock, and islet in that marvellous bay, from sunlit Amalfi to nestling Procida, and he made his way straight onward to the Piccola Marina, though slowly, from the steepness and vagaries of the broken Roman roads, overgrown with luxuriant vegetation, that his horse, a sturdy mountain-trained chestnut from Ischia, climbed cautiously.

A late hour was sounding from some campanile as he rode into that beautiful nook that lies turned towards Sicily, with its line of fisher-boats and white-walled cottages fringing the coast, and hidden among olives, cistus groves, and orangeries. Here and there—where strangers had made their dwelling—lights were gleaming, but the Capriotes all lay sleeping under their low-rounded roofs; he almost despaired of finding any guide to tell him which Villa was hers in that leafy nest among the sea-girt rocks.

At last he overtook a contadina heavily laden with wood, doing the work of pack-horses, as is the

common custom for women in the isles of the Syrens; she knew the name; the Contessa had bought some coral of her, for pity's sake, yesterday; the villa was down there in that little gorge just hanging over the sea, where the grey plumes of olive were thickest.

If any had asked it, he could not have answered with what definite purpose he went, whether to see her, whether to break on her privacy at such an hour, whether only to look on the place where she dwelt, and watch till the day should dawn: fixed aim he had none; he was urged by an impulse as vague as it was unconquerable, unregulated either by reason or by motive. He was in that mood in which chance does its best, or its worst, for a man; when he offers no resistance to it, and may even be hurried into guilt ere he knows what he does.

The lights were shining amongst the shades of olive and arbutus woods as his horse stumbled down the narrow defile, catching in the trailing vine tendrils at every step.

The dwelling literally overhung the sea, nestled on a low ridge of rock, curved round so that the whole arc of the bay, sweeping from east to west, was commanded by its windows, that saw the sun rise over the height of St. Angelo, fall in its noonday glory full on Naples, and Vesuvius, and Baiæ,

where they lie in the depth of that wondrous bow, and pass on to die in purple pomp behind wild Ischia. It was surrounded with all the profuse growth of the island; thickets of cistus, wilderness of myrtle, budding fig-trees, orangeries with their crowns of bridal blossom and their balls of amber fruit, while vast rocks rose above and shelved beneath it, with columns that towered to the clouds, and terraced ledges and broken gorges filled up with foliage. Through the leaves he saw the gleam of open windows, and the indistinct outline of the roof in the deep shade cast from the rocks above; the road he had followed ended abruptly on a narrow table of stone jutting out over a precipice whose depth he could not guess; and immediately fronting the casements from which the light streamed, divided from the terrace and strip of garden running beneath them, by a chasm perhaps some six feet wide. Thus from the rock he saw straight into the lighted chamber within, as he threw himself from his horse, and with his arm round a plane-tree to hold his footing, leaned over the edge and strained his eyes through the gloom to gaze into the interior that was before him like a picture painted on the shadow of the night. His heart stood still with a sickening pang, a deadly burning jealousy

that had never touched his life before. Through the draperies of the curtains he saw her, and saw her—not alone. She sat at the head of her table, that glittered with wax-lights and fruits and wines, and with her were some six or seven men, whose voices only reached him in a low inarticulate murmur, but whose laughter now and then echoed on his ear in the silence. At the foot of the table sat one whom he recognised at once; his back was to the windows, but the slight grace of his figure, and the elegance of his throat and head, with its closely-cut blond hair, sufficed to identify him to Erceldoune. What tie could he have to her, this cold, smiling, silken politician, who seemed perpetually by her side? In the warm night he shook as with icy chillness through all his veins; a brute longing seized him to spring like a lion into that dainty group, and fell them down as men of his blood in Bothwell's days had felled their foes in Border feuds,

> "when the loud corynoch rang for war
> Through Lorne, Argyle, Monteith, and Braidalbane."

Her other guests were all unknown to him, and looked like gentlemen-condottieri; moreover, all he saw was Idalia: she was leaning slightly forward,

her face was lighted with impassioned warmth, while her eyes, fixed upon the man nearest her, an Italian by the contour of his features, and of a careless princely bearing, that gave him greater distinction than the rest displayed, adjured him more eloquently still, than by the words with which her lips were moving.

The echo of her voice, though not the meaning of her speech, came to Erceldoune where he swung forward over the chasm in the hushed night, sweet and fatal as the Syren voices that had used to echo over those eternal seas that lapped the beach below. And as he heard it, a heart-sick misery seemed to make his life desolate; he had shaped no definite hope, his thoughts had known no actual form, but his love unconsciously had coloured both hope and thought: she so utterly filled his own life, he could not at once realise that he was nothing, not even a remembrance in hers.

He leaned nearer and nearer, regardless of the unfathomed precipice that yawned beneath him. At that instant Victor Vane rose, pushed back his chair, and approached the open glass doors; looking out from the brightly-lighted room, he could see the shadow of the man and horse upon the opposite ledge.

"The Romans hung their wreaths of roses over the doors, we in a more prosaic age must shut our windows," he said, with a light laugh, as he closed the venetian blinds, leaving only their thread-like chinks open for the passage of light outward, and the passage of air within.

A great darkness fronted Erceldoune; the moon was shining on all the silvered seas, and innumerable stars were out, but for him the blackness and blindness of night had never so utterly fallen.

Hours passed by uncounted, unheeded by him; the chimes of the campanile had chimed twelve, and one, and two, unheard by him; he was still there before the darkened windows. The Ischian horse grazed quietly off the grasses and young shoots among the rocks; Erceldoune watched the villa which sheltered her, as a lion watches the lair of his foe.

The night was absolute torture to him; intolerable suspense possessed him, and a reckless hatred of all those who were now within the chamber on which he was forbidden even to look. So near to her, and yet as far sundered as though seas divided them! His rivals with her whilst he stood without!—his imagination was filled with their looks, their words, the bold passion in their eyes, the lovely smile upon

her lips. What were they, what title could they claim to her, these men, who seemed so welcome to her? Something in the familiarity, the authority, of the Englishman's action, slight though it was, bore to him a terrible significance; were her revelries such as those for which the rose was hung above the doors of Rome?—were they the revelries of a Faustina? The thought passed over him, cold, gliding, poisonous as the coil of a snake; he flung it from him with fierce loathing, true to the motto of his old race: "One loyalty, one faith"—he had given both to her. He heeded neither time nor place; purpose he had none in staying there; to watch her life with suspicion or espionage was the last thought in him, the last baseness possible to him; but he could not tear himself from the place, he was fascinated to it, even by the very torment of his pain. How utterly she must have forgotten him! —how utterly careless must she be of what suffering she had dealt him! As he thought of the look that he had seen on her face, as he thought of those men gathered about her whilst he was absent, he paced the narrow rocky ridge like a man chained to his cell, while his foes riot in all that he has loved and treasured. And the closed casements faced him like an inexorable doom, while a faint glimmer of

light that here and there streamed through them seemed to mock him with fugitive tormenting glimpse, only serving to make the darkness darker still.

At last, when the greyness of dawn was breaking, there was a slight noise that stirred the stillness: the shutter unclosed, the glass door opened, he saw her—alone. There was no one now in the apartment, and she stood in the open window looking out on the sea that stretched far below, round the broken and jutting cliffs.

He leaned down scarcely breathing, till he hung half way over the chasm; was it possible that in this solitude she thought of him? Were those men anything to her, or was he more than they, or nothing? —not even a regret?

The moon at that moment strayed through on to the ledge, and she saw his shadow hanging midway down over the precipice, whose fatal depth slanted straight into the sea which had worn a narrow way through the fissure five hundred feet below. A cry of horror broke from her that had a greater tenderness in it than lies only in a mere fear for life imperilled; for all answer he swung himself one moment on the ledge, balanced the distance with an unerring eye, and with a mountaineer's leap that the glens and

hills of the Border had taught him long before, cleared the space and alighted at her feet.

"Does it matter to you whether I live or die?"

The brief prayer bore eloquence deeper than lies in ornate words; all the man's heart was spent in it; Idalia stood motionless and silent, her eyes fixed on him where he stood beside her, dropped as from the air upon the wild cliffs in the dead of night, when she believed him far distant on those eastern shores to which the sea beneath them ebbed away through league on league of starlight.

"Does it matter to you whether I live or die? he said afresh, while his voice quivered with a fiery piteous entreaty.

"Surely! It mattered to me when you were but a stranger."

A vivid joy thrilled through him, his eyes in the shadow burned down into hers with passionate appeal, with passionate reproach.

"Ay, but it was only a divine pity *then*, is it that only now? And with but pity in you for me, how could you deal me this last misery?"

What stirred her heart he could not tell.

"I bade you know no more of me," she said at last, while her eyes looked away from him down

into the still and silvered seas. "I told you nothing but bitterness could come to you from my friendship; nothing else can. Why would you not believe me while it was time?"

There was an intense and weary mournfulness in the words; they carried a deadly meaning to him, he gave them but one significance.

"You mean that even your memory is forbidden me?—that even my worship of you dishonours you?"

"Your words are as strange as your presence here. This is the time and place for neither."

"My words are strange! God help me! I hardly know what I say. Answer me, in pity's sake, what are they to you?"

"Who?"

And as she spoke, beneath the unbent hauteur of her voice and of her glance there was something as nearly kindred to anxiety and alarm as could approach Idalia's nature.

"Those men who were with you."

"Let me pass, sir. These are not questions for which you have right, or to which I give submission."

"I swear they shall be answered! What *are* they to you?"

She glanced at him in haughty amaze, tinged with some other feeling that he could not translate.

"You dare address me thus! Are you mad?"

"I think so!"

"I think so also," she said, coldly. "And now, sir, there is an end of these unwarranted questions, which you have as little title to ask as I have inclination to answer. Leave me, or let me pass."

He stood in her path, half mad as he said:

"I will know one thing—are you any man's wife?"

Utter surprise passed over her face, and something of contemptuous annoyance.

"I reply to nothing asked in such a manner," she said briefly. "Let me pass, sir."

"No! Tell me this one thing for the love of pity!"

The anguish in his voice touched her; she paused a moment.

"It can concern you in no way," she answered him distantly. "But since you ask it—know that I cherish freedom too well to be wedded."

"I thank God,—I may love you without sin."

His voice was very low, and his words had a greater intensity because their passion was restrained in obedience to her: there was grandeur in their very simplicity. She raised her head with her old stag-like gesture—looking to the sea, and not to him.

"Sir, you have no title to speak such words. You cannot say that I have ever given you the faintest."

"Have I ever said it? No! you have given me no title, but I claim one."

"Claim!"

"I claim one. The title that every man has to love, though he go unloved—to love better than life, and only less than honour."

He spoke steadily, undauntedly, as became his own self-respect and dignity, but his voice had an accent which told her that world-wide as the love had been that she had roused, none ever had loved her as this man did. For a moment she turned and looked at him, a look fleeting, and veiled from him by the flickering shadows. The look was soon banished, and her eyes strayed backward to the sea; her face was very pale, but she moved away with her proud and languid grace:

"These words are painful to us both;—no more of them, sir. Farewell."

The word struck him as a shot strikes one of his Border deer; in the impulse of his agony he caught her trailing dress, and held it as a sentenced captive might hold the purple hem of his sovereign's robes.

"Stay! A moment ago you said you cared whether I lived or died;—as I live now I will die to-night—in that sea at your feet—if you tell me to leave you for ever."

A shudder ran through her; looking down on him she saw that fatigue, long fasting, the misery of the past hours, and the force of the feeling he bore her, had unloosed his passions and unstrung his nerves till his brain was giddy; and—his calm failing him—she saw that in every likelihood, as surely as the stars shone above them, he would keep his word and fling away his whole existence for her.

Commonly she was too careless of men's lives, as of their peace; but here she could not be so. She had saved him, she could not so soon again destroy him.

"Hush!" she said more softly. "The noblest woman would never be worth *that!* It would be better that we should part. When I tell you that it can bring you no happiness——"

"Whatever it bring, I said before, I accept it! My life is yours to save or throw away, as you will; answer me, which shall it be?"

There was a suppressed violence, a terrible suffering, in his voice, that moved her almost with such shuddering pain as though she witnessed his death before her sight; in the light falling from the opened windows she could see the burning gleam in his eyes and the red flush that darkened the bronze of his face.

"Live!" she answered him, while her own voice lost its chillness. "You do not know now what you say; with calmer hours you will see how little worth it I or any woman could be. You may meet me again,—but you must speak no more of such words as you have spoken to-night. I have your promise?"

"Till my strength shall fail me to keep it."

"When it does, we shall meet no more."

Then she left him, and passed through the chamber that was opened to the night, till, in the distance, the clustered flowers and statues veiled her among them, and the closing of a door echoed with a dull sound through the stillness.

He stood alone on the terrace, the noise of the sea surging in his ear, his pulse beating, his brain

reeling: he could not tell what to believe, what to trust, what to think.

The single-hearted nature of the man had too honest a mould, too masculine a cast, to follow or to divine the complex intricacies of a woman's life, of a woman's impulses and motives. He felt blinded, powerless, heart-sick, dizzy, now crushed with reckless despair at the chill memory of her words, now touched with sweet wild hope, because he thought her free to be won if daring, fidelity, and devotion could avail to win her.

To doubt her, never—even now, even with all that he had seen and heard—occurred to him. He believed that she might only pity him with proud cold pity; he believed that it was faintly, remotely possible that by force of his own mighty love some tenderness might be at last wakened for him in her heart. But between these he saw no path. He never thought that she might be—but fooling, and destroying him.

He had comparatively seen little of women; nothing of such a woman as Idalia. His bold and sanguine nature quickly grasped at hope; even in all the humility of his love it was not in him to surrender.

Till morning broke beyond the giant mass of St.

Angelo, he paced up and down the cliffs, with the waves beating music at his feet. Then he flung himself down on the moss that covered a ledge of the rock, with his saddle beneath his head, as he had lain many a night under Asiatic stars and on Andes slopes, and on yellow Libyan sand; physical fatigue brought sleep, and sleep was gentler to him than his waking life, it gave him dreams, and with his dreams Idalia.

As she passed from him through the embrasure of the myrtle-shrouded window, and crossing her reception-room, entered an inner chamber, at the farther end stood Victor Vane—too far to have heard what had been spoken, yet near enough through the suite of apartments to have seen out on the terrace above the sea. A few minutes before he had left the villa with her other guests, whose boats were taking them across to Naples; now he had returned and awaited her, half with the familiarity of a man who shared her confidence, half with the hesitation of one who fears he may give offence.

"You are here still; and so late! I suppose you bring news of importance you could not give before them?" she said, with a shade of annoyance in the languor of her voice. He had approached with a quick step, an eager warmth upon his face; he was

checked and chilled, vaguely yet irresistibly, as he met her glance. He was rarely to be daunted, still less rarely to be shamed; yet he was both now. He paused involuntarily, his eyes fell, and words died on his lips, as he bowed before her.

"And your intelligence?" she asked.

"Intelligence? Caffradali has deserted us."

Idalia lifted her eyebrows.

"He is as well lost as retained. What else?"

"You know that the Ducroscs will send twenty thousand rifles into Poland, and that Falkenstein goes to take the command of the Towaricz?"

She gave a gesture of impatience.

"He will 'command' them when they are organized—*when!* It was I who sent him. This can scarcely be your intelligence—your intelligence that will not wait till to-morrow?"

He hesitated, with a strangely novel embarrassment upon him.

"I waited—to congratulate you on your conquest of the Prince to the cause."

A light of triumph gave its pride to her eyes, and its warmth to her brow; she smiled, as with the memory of victory.

"Viana! Yes—it is something to have secured him, semi-Bourbon that he is! But I still remain

at a loss to imagine why you re-appear at this time of the night."

A flush of anger heated the delicate coldness of her listener's face, his silken and gentle courtesies were forgotten for the moment.

"Such an hour, madame! It is not too late for that wild wanderer yonder to be favoured with an interview!"

The moment the words escaped him he repented them; he knew how rash they were with the nature and disdainful dignity of the woman to whom he spoke. Idalia cast one glance on him of superb indifference; but she gave no betrayal of surprise, not even of disquiet, far less of embarrassment.

"If you only came to arraign my actions, I will be obliged to you to retire."

"Wait. Hear me first. I can act indifference no longer. I came back to-night for one thing only—to tell you what you know, as well as you know that the stars shine yonder—that I love you!"

She heard him with that same indifference, and ironic amusement.

"I think we are too well acquainted with each other for this. I gave you more credit than to suppose *you* would talk in this fashion."

He looked up at her with a passionate pain; he

had been heartless, and been proud of his heartlessness; he had mocked all his life through at what other men felt and suffered, and passion or tenderness had been alike the subject of his most cutting sneer; but—for the moment, at least—his creed had deserted him, his wisdom and his sarcasm had failed him; for the moment he loved, as utterly as ever a lover did, and he felt powerless to make her credit it. But eloquence was always at his bidding, and eloquence came now; every honeyed flattery, every imploring eagerness, every impassioned pleading, that could warm or shake the heart of the woman who heard him, poured from his lips. Persuasive always, he was a thousand-fold more so now that for the first time in his existence genuine passion had broken up his callousness, and a sense of hopelessness shivered his self-reliance. He loved her, if it were but a mingling of desire, of ambition, of senses intoxicated by her beauty, of pride piqued by her disdain; and he felt impotent to make her even believe this—far more impotent to make her accept it.

She heard him without interruption, smiling a little as she heard; she was half wearied, half amused, as at a comedy known and stale from custom, yet amusing because well acted.

"Monsieur, I gave you credit for better taste," she said, quietly, as he paused. "I have had so much of this so often; granted you are unusually eloquent, unusually graceful, but even with those accessories the tale is very tiresome; and it has one great drawback, you see—we neither of us believe it!"

"Believe! how can I make you believe? I tell you that ever since I saw you first I have been so changed that I have wondered if I lived or dreamed; I have felt all that once I disdained as only fit for boys and fools! What more can I tell you?—you must *know* that I speak truth."

"What a recantation! I am not a fitting hearer for it at all, nor likely to appreciate it. I will thank you far more to amuse me with your bon-mots, which are really good, than to entertain me with your efforts in Romeo's strain, which, though very pretty, are very stale!"

"Wait!—for pity's sake. Doubt what you will, mock at what you will, but believe at least that I love you!"

She laughed softly.

"We do not believe in love—*nous autres!*"

"And yet men have gone to their death only for love of you!"

"No proof of wisdom if they did."

A little while before he had thought as she thought; a few months earlier and his incredulity of every such madness and emotion was not more scornful than her own; now, intoxicated with the disdainful beauty of the only woman who had ever cost him a moment's pang, he believed in all the wildest follies of romance, and would have staked everything he owned on earth, or wagered on the future, to move her and to win her. For the only time in his life he was baffled, for the only time powerless. His hands clenched where he stood before her.

"Hear me at the least before you banish me. Listen! what is there we might not compass together? You adore sovereignty, it should go hard if I did not give it you. You are ambitious, your ambition cannot overleap mine. We are both against the world; together we would subdue it. Empty thrones have fallen to hands bold enough to grasp them as they reel through revolutions; you and I might wear a crown if our aims and power were one. Love me, and there is no height I will not raise you to, no ordeal I will not pass through for you, no living man who shall baffle or outrun me. I have the genius that rules worlds—I would lay one at your feet."

Every word that he uttered he meant; in the excitement of the instant, sweeping down all the suave and hardened coldness of his temperament, he felt the power in him to do and to dare greatly; he felt that for her, through her, with her, there should be no limit to the ambition and the triumph of his life; he spoke wildly, blindly, exaggeratedly, but he spoke with an exaltation that for the second made him a nobler and a truer man than he had been in all the cool scorn of his wisdom and his mockery. Yet he did not move her, much less did he win her.

She looked at him with a smile in her eyes, and a haughty languor in her attitude. She—merciless from knowing the world too well, and gifted with a penetration far beyond the common range of women—saw that the gold offered her was adulterated; that the springs of his speech were as much self-love as love.

"I understand you," she said, as he paused. "I could advance your ambitions well, and you would be glad that I should do so; your vanity, your policy, your schemes, and—perhaps a little, too—your admiration, are all excited and chime in with another one; and that compound you call love. Well, it is as good a name for it as anything else.

But as for thrones! I thought we called ourselves Liberalists and Redressers? Crowns scarcely hang in the air like roses, as you seem to think, for any passer-by to gather them; but if they do, how do *you* reconcile the desire for one with all your professions of political faith? I suppose, then, like most democrats, you only struggle against tyranny that you may have the right in turn to create yourself Tyrannis?"

His hands closed on a cluster of rhododendrons in the window, and tore them down with an unconscious gesture. In a measure he was wronged; he loved her enough in that moment to have renounced every ambition and every social success for her, and he could not make her even believe that any feeling was in him. In a measure, too, her satire was right, and pierced him the more bitterly because it laid bare so mercilessly all that was confused and unacknowledged to himself. In his pain in her contempt, he hated her almost as much as he loved her, and the old barbaric leaven of jealousy, that he had used to ridicule as the last insanity of fools, broke out despite all self-respect that would have crushed it into silence.

"You are very pitiless, madame!" he said in his teeth. "Do you deal as mockingly with that beg-

gared courier whom you favour with interviews at an hour you think untimely for lovers less distinguished?"

Her glance swept over him with the grand amazement of one whom no living man ever arraigned. He could not tell whether his insult moved her one whit for sake of the man whom his jealousy seized as his rival; but he saw that it had for ever ruined all hope for himself. She looked at him calmly, with a contempt that cut him like a knife.

"I did not know that my wines were so strong or your head so weak. If you transgress the limits of courtesy, I must transgress those of hospitality, and —dismiss you."

He knew that it was as vain to seek to move or sway her from that serene indifference, as to dash himself against the Capri rocks in striving to uproot them; yet in his desperation he lost all the keen and subtle tact, the fine inscrutable ability, that had never failed him save with her. He laid his hands on the sweeping folds of her dress, with the same gesture of entreaty that Erceldoune had used in the unconscious vehemence of his prayer.

"Idalia—stay! Take heed before you refuse my love, for love it *is*, God help me."

She drew the laces from him, and moved away.

"You have as much belief in the name you invoke, monsieur, as I have in the love for which you invoke it! Come! we alike know the world too well for this comedietta not to weary both. You must end it, or I."

"No!—hear me out," he said, fiercely, almost savagely, for one whose impassive gentleness had commonly been his choicest mask and weapon. "Think twice before you refuse any toleration to my love. Take *that*, and you shall make me your slave; refuse it, and you will never have had a foe such as you shall find in me. Remember—you cannot brave me lightly, you cannot undo the links that connect us, you cannot wash out my knowledge of all that you have held most secret. Remember whose thoughts and acts and intrigues I have in my keeping. I know that you would give all your loveliness in tribute to me to bribe me from uttering to the world——"

"You try intimidation? I accredited you with better breeding and less melodrama," said Idalia, her careless negligence unruffled, as with a bow like that with which queens dismiss their courts, she passed from the chamber ere he could follow or arrest her;—it would have been a man bolder and

more blinded still than he was, who should have dared to do either.

He was left there alone, in the midst of the white warm light and of the burnished leaves swaying against the marble columns; to his lips oaths never came, he was too finely polished, but an imprecation was hurled back upon his heart that cursed her with a terrible bitterness, and a hatred great as was his baffled passion. He hated her for his own folly in bending to the common weakness of men; he hated her for the disdainful truth with which he had penetrated the mixed motives in his heart; he hated her for the shame she had put upon him of offering her a rejected and despised passion; he hated her for all the numberless sorceries of her fascination, of her brilliance, of her pride, which had made him weak as water before their spell. To win her there was nothing he would have checked at; she had become the incarnation of his ambitions, as she might have been the means of their fruition; all that gave her danger to other men but gave her added intoxication for him; she would have been to him, had she but loved him, what the genius and the beauty of her whom they called Hellas Rediviva were to Tallien. And more bitter than pride stung, or vanity pierced,

or ambition shattered, was the sense that love her as he had, love her as he would, consume his very heart for her sake as he might, he would never —plead, beseech, swear, or prove it as he should —make her believe that one pulse of love beat in him.

And all the bygone ironies and contemptuous scoffs which he had used to cast on those who suffered for the lost smile of a woman's eyes came back upon him now, laughing in his ear and jibing at his weakness like fantastic devils mocking at his fall. A woman had enthralled him; and his philosophics were dead—corpses that lay cold and powerless before him, incapable of rallying to his rescue, things of clay without a shadow's value.

CHAPTER II.

THE ALLEGORY OF THE POMEGRANATE.

The early morning broke on Capri; with the rising of the sun the little fleet of boats all down the shore began to flutter into motion as the birds fluttered into song, the Angelus rang, the full daylight glittered over the white line of towns and villages that nestled far and wide in the bow of the bay; in the transparent air a delicate feathery column of grey smoke curled up from the cone of Vesuvius; the cliffs rose up in the sunlight, vine-covered, and standing like pillars out in the midst of the sea; while the mists were still hanging over that deep blue western depth, stretching out and on to the Mediterranean, farther and farther towards the columns of Hercules and the gates of the African and Asian worlds.

In her own chamber, a morning-room whose windows, clustered round with trained myrtle and clematis, looked out down the shelving cliff on to

the sea, Idalia stood; her head was bent, her eyes were grave and filled with thought, and her lips had as much of disdain as of melancholy; she looked a woman to dare much, to reign widely, to submit rarely, to fear never. Yet she was in bondage now.

At a breakfast table, a little distance from her sat Conrad, Count Phaulcon. He was smoking, having finished with the coffee and claret, fruit and fish beside him, and was looking at her under his lashes, a look half wary, half admiring, half angered, half exultant, the look of a man foiled in holding her by intimidation, but successful in holding her by power; yet not wholly at his ease with her, nor wholly so with himself.

"If you would only hear reason," he said, impatiently; he had vanquished her in one sense, but in another she was still his victor, and he was restless under it.

"I am happy to hear reason," she answered coldly, "but of dishonour I am—a little tired!"

There was a certain listless satiric bitterness in the last words.

"Dishonour!" echoed Phaulcon, while the blood flushed over his forehead, and he moved irritably. "How strangely you phrase things! What has changed you so? For a woman of the world, a

woman of your acumen, of your experience, of your brilliancy!—to pause and draw back for such puerile after-thoughts—I cannot in the least comprehend it. What a sceptre you hold! Bah! stronger than any queen's. Queens are mere *fantoccini*—marionnettes crowned for a puppet-show, and hung on wires that each minister pulls after his own fancy; but you have a kingdom that is never limited, except at your own choice; an empire that is exhaustless, for when you shall have lost your beauty, you will still keep your power. You smile, and the politician tells you his secret; you woo him, and the velvet churchman unlocks his intrigues; you use your silver eloquence, and you save a cause or free a country. It is supreme power, the power of a woman's loveliness, used as you use it, with a statesman's skill."

She smiled slightly; but the tranquil carelessness and resistance of her attitude did not change. Those persuasive, vivacious, hyperbolic words—she remembered how fatal a magic, how alluring a glamour such as they had once had for her; they had no charm now, they had long ceased to have any.

"A supreme power!" pursued Phaulcon. "In the rose-water of your hookahs you steep their minds in what colour you will. With the glance of

your eyes, you unnerve their wills, and turn them which way you choose. In an opera supper you enchant their allegiance to what roads you like; in the twilight of a boudoir you wind the delicate threads that agitate nations. You are in the heart of conspiracies, in the secrets of cabinets, in the destinies of coalitions, and with Fascination conquer, where Reason would fail. It is the widest power in the world; it is that of Antonina, of Marcia, of Olympia, of Pompadour! What can be lacking in such a life?"

"Only what was wanting in theirs—honour!"

The words were spoken very calmly, but there was not the less meaning in them.

"Honour! What makes you all in a moment so in love with that word? There was a time when you saw nothing but what was triumph in your career."

"It is not for *you* to reproach me with that."

Over his changing, handsome, eloquent features a certain flush and shadow came.

"Reproach! I would rather reproach you with the change. And why should there be this continued estrangement between us, Idalia? You loved me once."

Her eyes dwelt on his musingly, very mournfully,

with that lustre of disdain that was in them, mingled with a momentary wistfulness of recollection.

"Yes, I loved you once," she answered, and her voice had an excessive gentleness in it; but he knew her meaning too well to ask why it was that this was now solely and irrevocably of the past.

He was silent some moments; the dashing and reckless Free Lance felt an embarrassment and a sense of mortification in her presence. He could hold this haughty and exquisite woman in a grip of steel, and feel a savage victory in forcing the proud neck that would not bend, to lie beneath his heel; he could take a refined exultation of cruelty in seeing her pride rebel, her instincts recoil, her dignity suffer mutely; he could amuse himself with all this with a rich pleasure in it. Nevertheless, he owed her many and heavy debts; he gave her an admiration that was tinged still with a strange tyrannous wayward sort of love; he held her in an unwilling homage that made him half afraid of her, and he shrank under the sense of her censure and of her rebuke.

In one sense he was her master, but in another she was far above him, in another she was his ruler, and escaped his power.

He rose restlessly; the glance he gave her was

doubtful and embarrassed, and his tone was half appealing, half imperious.

"Well, there is one thing, I want more money."

"You always want money!"

There was a weary scorn in her words, the scorn of a proud woman forced into companionship with what has sunk too utterly in her eyes for any other feeling save that only of an almost compassionate contempt.

Phaulcon laughed; not because he was impervious to the contempt, but because the temper of the man was really lightly and idly insouciant, careless as any butterfly, except in hate.

"Of course! who doesn't? Is there anything money won't buy, from a woman's love to a priest's absolution? Tell me that! A man without money is like a man born into the world without his eyes or his legs; he exists, he doesn't *live;* he hibernates miserably, he never knows what it is to enjoy! Who are the kings of the earth? The Hopes, the Pereires, the Rothschilds, the Barings. War could not be begun, imperial crowns would never come out of pawn, nations would collapse in bankruptcies, thrones would crash down to the dust, and nobles turn crossing-sweepers, without them. Who rule Europe, kings, ministers, cabinets, troops? Faugh!

not one whit of it—the CAPITALISTS! Which was the potentate, the great Emperor who owed the bond, or the great Fugger who could afford to put it in the fire? Yes, I do want money. Can you let me have any?"

Her lips moved slightly, she restrained whatever words might rise to them, but she did not repress the disgust that was spoken silently on them.

"You wish to ruin my fortune now?"

"Far from it," laughed Phaulcon. "I am not like the boy who killed his goose of the golden eggs. I would not ruin you on any account; but even if I did, you know very well that any one of your *friends* would willingly make up any breaches I caused in your wealth."

Where she stood, with one hand leaning idly on the carved ivory of a chess King, she turned with a sudden gesture. He had broken down her haughty silence, her studied contemptuous tranquillity at last. A flush rose over her brow, her lips quivered, not with fear, but with loathing; her eyes flashed fire. All the gentleness that in her moments of abandonment characterised her, and all the languor that at other hours made her so indolently and ironically indifferent, changed into a fearless defiance, the more

intense from its force of contrast with the restrained serenity of her past self-control.

"One other word like that and you never enter my presence again, if to be free from you I close the gates of a convent on my own life. What! are you so vile as *that*? Is all shame lost in you?"

If it were not, there were moments when he was as bad a man as the world held, when the devil in him was alone victorious, and all conscience that had ever lingered was crushed out and forgotten. Her words, and yet far more, her look, lashed all that was evil in his nature to its height.

He laughed aloud.

"'A world of scorn looks beautiful' in you, that I grant, Eccellenza! At the same time your title to it is not quite clear. It is for the women who go to Courts to smile with that superb disdain, to answer with that proud defiance—not for the Countess Vassalis!"

There was not much in the words themselves, but in their tones there was an intolerable insolence, an intolerable insult. The fire in her eyes burned deeper still, her breath came rapidly, her whole form was instinct with a passion held in rein, rather for sake of her own dignity than for any more timorous thing. Standing in

that haughty wrath, that self-enforced restraint, she looked like some superb stag, some delicate antelope, at bay, and panting to spring on its foes.

"Do you think such taunts as that—*your* taunts! have power to wound me for one instant? Where is your boasted wisdom? It has forsaken you strangely, as strangely as your memory! Whatever I have lost, the loss is due to you; whatever I have erred in, the error lies with you; whatever wreck my life has made, is wrecked through you; whatever taint is on my name, was brought there first by you. You have tried my patience long and often; you have tried it once too much. You have trusted to the tie that is between us; it is broken for ever as if it had not been. Insult through you I have continually borne. What the world has said has been as nothing to me, my life is not ruled by it, my honour is not touched by it. But insult from you I will never bear. Be my destroyer as you choose; but your accomplice again you shall never make me —nor your dupe. Stand aside, sir, I will hear no more words."

He had laid his hand upon her arm, she shook him off with an action as intense in its gesture of contempt as her words had been intense in their

concentrated passion, and swept beyond him towards the doorway of her chamber.

Phaulcon sprang before her, and stood between her and the closed doors; there was a taint of cowardice in his nature, and he had forgotten all policy when he had let malice and vengeance hurry him into an open rupture with one who was beyond all others needful to him, and who, whatever her foes, whatever her faults, still never feared.

"Idalia!—wait."

"Let me pass, sir."

"No, by Heaven! not in such a mood."

"You wish to compel me to summon my household?"

"I wish to induce you to hear reason."

"Your euphuistic synonym for some new villany? I have answered you already."

"Softly, softly! It will not do for *us* to quarrel. You know the terms on which alone you can make such an answer final."

"Your persecution? I am indifferent to it. Allow me to pass."

"Pardon me, no. The terms I meant were—the breaking of your oath."

He spoke very gently, yet at the words she turned pale for the first time in their interview, as though he

had pierced her where she was without shield; she did not reply, and he pursued his advantage.

"Tell me,—will your new and eccentric fancy for 'honour' be greatly gratified by the deliberate rupture of your sworn word? When men and women talk much of their honour, to be sure they are always conscious of having lost it, or being just about to lose it with a more flagrant bankruptcy than common; but still, your newly-adopted principle will be ill-commenced by the repudiation of your pledged oath, of your bound engagement."

Still she said nothing, only in her eyes suppressed passion gleamed, and her hand clenched as though, but for her dignity's sake, it would have found force to strike him where he stood.

Conrad Phaulcon smiled.

"I am no tyrant, no harsh task-master, my most beautiful Countess, and I frankly admit that I admire you more in your haughty rebellion than I do in the softest smile with which you enchant all our good friends. I exact nothing. I command nothing. I merely remind you—you cannot break from me without also breaking your promise, and more than your promise—your oath. However, a woman's word, I suppose—even when it is sworn, even when it is the word of such a woman as your-

self, who have none of your sex's weaknesses—is only given to *be* broken. Is it so?"

She answered nothing still; a slight quick shudder of hatred or of contempt passed over her one moment; she was torn inwardly with such a conflict as the prisoner on parole feels when he might break his fetters away, and strive, at least, for the sweet chance of liberty, were he not held back by one torturing memory—his word.

Suddenly she turned and bent rapidly towards him, her eyes looking into his with so full and brilliant a lustre of unuttered scorn, that he started and drew back.

"You sell everything—your body and your soul! What bribe would you take to give me my release?"

"What bribe? None! You are much more to me, my exquisite Idalia, than any gold, well as I love the little god. 'Bribe!' What an ugly word! Bribes are like medicines; every one takes them, but no one talks about them. Your 'release,' too! when you live as free as air!"

She said no more, but stood aloof from him again in haughty and enforced composure.

"Leave my presence, or let me pass out," she said, briefly. "One or the other."

"Either, with pleasure, if you will give me two answers. First, will you break your oath?"

The look that gave so much of heroism and of grandeur to her beauty passed across it; to stoop to supplication to him would have been as utterly impossible to her as to have put down her neck beneath his heel, and though she could not break his bonds, she was not vanquished by him. She answered with a calm endurance that obeyed, not him, but the law of her own nature:

"No."

"Ah, that is well and wise, *ma belle*. Now for the other question. You will give me the money?"

"No."

The reply was precisely the same as it had been before: the triumph in his eyes fell.

"And why not?"

"Because every sum I gave you now would seem given because I feared you. Fall as low as that, you know well enough that I shall never do. As far as you hold me by my oath, so far I will hold myself bound, no farther; for the rest I have said — all is cancelled henceforward between us."

"What? Do you mean that you deny my title

to my power on you? Do you mean that it can ever be possible for your mere will to cancel such a tie as there is between us? Do you mean that, if you pretend to forget the past and all my claims on you, I shall ever allow them to be forgotten?"

"'Forgotten?' No. It is not so easy to forget. But trade on them longer, I have said, you shall never do. I have endured your exactions too many years already."

"But, by Heaven! then I insist——"

"You cannot insist. If you need money, you know the price of it: my release from you, as far as you have the power to bestow it. On other terms, you will never again live on my gold. The choice will be for you."

"But I demand——"

"You can demand nothing, sir."

And with a movement that even now did not stoop to be hurried, or lose in any sort its dignity, she swept by him before he could arrest her, passed through the door, and closed it.

He knew Idalia well enough to know that to force himself on her, or seek to intimidate her into compliance with his will, would be as utterly vain as to seek to quarry with a razor the great black heights

of Tiberio towering yonder in the light. Half the victory was in his hands, half in hers. To gain the rest, he knew that he must wait.

He left her, and went out across the gardens and down the winding way that led along the rocks to the shore. He was not wholly satisfied with his morning's work; he felt the mute resistance of a proud nature against a power of which he was tyrannously and inexorably jealous, and he knew that this power did not extend over her money, of which he had often received much, of which he was always wanting to receive more. Besides, with all his evil triumph in galling and goading her to his uttermost ingenuity, a certain shame was always on him before Idalia, and a certain love for her always survived in his heart; love that was always strangely blent with something of unwilling homage, of reluctant awe, and, now and then, of absolute repentance.

He would not have undone one of the links of the fetters he had made her wear under the purple-hemmed and gold-broidered robes of her beauty, freedom, and supremacy; but at the same time, in her presence or freshly from it, he felt ashamed of having forged them. Long habit had killed almost everything in him that had once been a little better;

but Conrad Phaulcon had still here and there certain flashes of conscience left.

As he went towards the beach, round a sharp point of rock abruptly jutting out with its hanging screen of ivy and myrtle, ere he looked where he went, his foot was almost against the arm of a man lying there, in the shadow, asleep.

Erceldoune lay on the grass, the horse standing motionless beside him; his limbs were stretched out in all their careless magnificence of strength, his head had fallen slightly back, his chest rose and fell with the calm breathings of a deep repose, and as the morning light slanted through a fissure of the cliffs it was full upon his face, from which in repose the dauntless light, the eagle fire, had gone, and only had left now a profound and serene melancholy.

It was yet early; sleep had only come to him as the sun had risen, after hours of intense excitement, and a night of extreme bodily fatigue. There was nothing to awaken him here, and lulled by the pleasant murmur of the seas and the warmth of the young day, he dreamt on still. The Greek started violently, and a fierce panther-like longing was the first thing that seized him, mingled with supreme amazement; a ferocious vindictiveness darkened and flushed the glory of his face; he

paused, his lips a little parted, his teeth ground, his whole form quivering with the longing to spring; his temperament was intensely vivacious, and years had done nothing to chill if they had done much to harden him, and little by little he had so gathered up his hatred towards the man he had injured, that it was as great as though that injury had been received, instead of given, by him.

He stooped over the sleeper, noting the unarmed powerlessness of that slumber, while his glance wandered by sheer instinct towards a loose, weighty, mallet-like mass of granite lying near him. One blow from it in a sure hand, and the life would be still before it could waken for a struggle, a shout, a sigh.

"I might crush out his brains as easily as a fly, and, by God, I could do it, too!" he thought, in a fierce blindness of hatred that remembered only that night ride through the pomegranates, and forgot all the vileness of his own brutality towards this man who lay sleeping at his feet.

Without waking, Erceldoune stirred slightly; his right hand that lay open, clenched; he turned with a restless sigh—he was dreaming of Idalia still. At the movement his foe cowered, and drew back involuntarily; pusillanimity ran in his blood, and he

had a keen dread of this "Border Eagle," who had been invulnerable under so many shots, and had had a resurrection almost from the grave; a dread nearly as strong as his hate for him. Moreover, with that action he remembered many things, policy before all, which forbade him to attempt any risk of reckoning with the man he had left for dead in the Carpathians. He took one long glance at him—the glance of hatred is as lingering as that of love, and of still surer recollection—then hastily and noiselessly turned aside over the thick grasses, and went his way down to the beach.

It was not through any sense of shame or of humanity that he left the sleeping man unharmed, it was not even that he would have shrunk from crushing the life out of him as mercilessly as out of a cicala; it was only that he remembered the danger and unwisdom of such self-indulgence, and also, in some faint emotion, he felt a sense that Idalia was near them both—too near for him to sink into such crime as this. In his own way he loved her, in his own way revered her, though he cared nothing how he tortured, almost as little how he ruined her. While under her influence he could not be his worst.

An hour later he had crossed the bay, and ap-

proached a *palazetto* smothered in orange trees, whose terraces overhung the sea, odorous, and shaded deep with myrtle. He made his way unannounced, and passing through several chambers entered one in which he found the temporary owner of the house, who looked up wearily and listlessly;—the owner was Victor Vane.

"Well?" he asked, as the door closed.

"That Scot! That courier!" panted Phaulcon. "He is in Capri. I passed him lying asleep on the grass; I could have killed him like a dog. Does he know Idalia? Is it possible he can have learnt that it was she who saved him?"

"Know Idalia? Yes, beyond doubt, he knows her."

"He does? She never named him to me!"

"Very possibly; but you remember how she saved him, and Miladi has her caprices!—she had him with her day after day in the East."

The words were languid still; there was no irritation expressed in them, but there was a significance for which, had Erceldoune been there, the speaker would have been hurled out on to his terrace with as little ceremony as though he had been dead Border grouse.

Even his comrade and sworn ally darted a

look on him savage, passionate, but withal that *better* than any look he had given, for a hot and frank wrath was in it, with something of generous challenge.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean what I say—no more. This gentleman—your Carpathian friend—found her out while he was chasing what he very absurdly calls his 'assassin' down the Bosphorus shore; he dined with her when we were there, and the Countess appeared to take a very flattering interest in the landless laird. He is a handsome giant, you know, and I have often noticed that your women of intellect have a wonderful eye for physical perfections!"

With every quiet word he plunged a stab of steel into his listener's heart, with every one he veiled more closely the passions that were moving in his own. The colour changed in Phaulcon's face, he writhed under every syllable, but he could resist none; the same merciless tyranny as he had exercised over Idalia was used over him now, and he had not the fearless and haughty strength which was in hers that could have enabled him to defy or to disdain it.

"In the East—in the East?" he muttered. "With *her?*—and she never told me!"

"*Caro!* Did you imagine you had your fair Countess's confidence? I can assure you you are excessively mistaken."

Phaulcon shook in all his limbs with restrained passion. Well as he knew the art of word-torturing, he was scarce so perfect an adept in it as his friend.

"Do you mean——" he began impetuously, and paused.

Vane laughed, rose, and sauntered a little way from the table.

"Have you breakfasted? Do I mean what? Just taste one of these citrons; they are the first ripe this season. Do I mean that your friend, the Border Chief, has lost his head after the Countess Vassalis? Yes, I do mean it. He is wildly in love with her, and he has eyes that say so remarkably well, considering that he had loved nothing but tiger-shooting and hard riding till that charming piece of romance in the Carpathians."

The words were easy, indifferent, a little flippant and contemptuous: they stung the Greek like so many scorpions. He flung himself out of his seat, and paced to and fro the apartment with fierce breathless oaths ground out on his lips. Vane looked at him with an admirable affectation of amused astonishment.

"*Pace, pace, caro!*" he said, softly. "Why *will* you always be so impetuous? Vesuvius yonder, who looks rather dangerous to-day by-the-by, was never more impulsive! What annoys you so much in this colossal courier being in love with Miladi Idalia? He is not the first by many a score!"

Conrad Phaulcon swung round and strode up to his tormentor.

"By Heaven, if you taunt me, or scoff at her with that——"

"Gently, gently, très cher! *We* do not quarrel. Besides, there is really no object in assuming all that with me. Just recollect how long I have known you—and how well!"

Phaulcon was silenced, and lashed into obedience: his head dropped; he turned again, and paced the chamber with fast, uneven steps.

"This idea annoys you," pursued his counsellor, leisurely. "I grant his presence is troublesome, awkward indeed for you; and Scotch patience with Spanish fire is a disagreeable combination. Besides, your own excessive impetuosity made that little affair very notorious; if he were to recognise you, I fear, do what you would, something extremely unpleasant would result. Still, with due caution this might not happen, and no danger need occur from it if

Idalia do not betray you, and that she probably will not do, unless—unless——" Victor paused a moment, and let his eyes drop on his companion. "He is a magnificent man to look at, and adores her in all good faith, which might have the charm of novelty," he added, in a musing whisper.

"Damnation! I would lay her dead at my feet if I thought——"

Vane raised his hand in deprecation.

"Pray do not be so very excessive! That language was all very well in the middle ages; both you and Sir Fulke Erceldoune have dropped in on us by mistake, out of the Crusades. But your brilliant Idalia is not a woman to be murdered. In the first place, she is too beautiful; in the second, she is too notorious; in the third, a glance of her eyes would send any assassin back again unnerved and unstrung. No; you must neither kill him, nor kill her. The idea! What barbarism, and what blundering. It is only—excuse me—madmen who use force; is it not their own necks that pay the penalty?"

"But do you mean that she has any sort of feeling for this accursed Scot?"

The other smiled.

'Dear friend, is it for me to say what new caprice your fair Countess's will may indulge in? Certainly, if one might attribute such a provinciality to the most accomplished woman of her time, I should have said, by the little I saw in Constantinople, that she did feel some sort of tenderness to your Titan of an enemy. At least, she made him win at baccarat, bade me harm him 'at my peril,' and spent the hours alone with him in a very poetic manner. Though really I cannot imagine why she should smile on a penniless Queen's Messenger, except by the feminine rule of contradiction!"

Lashing him like the separate cords of a scourge, each word fell on his listener's ear. Vane watched his fury with gratified amusement; this thing had been bitter beyond all conception to him, lightly and idly as he purposely spoke of it, and it rejoiced him with a compensating satisfaction to turn its bitterness elsewhere. Furious oaths in half the tongues of Europe chased themselves one after another off the Greek's lips. Vane let this galled and futile passion spend itself in its vain wrath some moments, then he spoke again:

"The idea annoys you? Well, certainly he is an inconvenient person to be on the list of her lovers. But what can you do? As for shooting

him, or doing anything of the kind, that would create a fracas,—it is not to be thought of. If you let him see you, all he will do will be to knock you down, and give you into arrest. Beside this, Idalia is in a great measure independent of you; over her wealth you have no legal control, and all moral claim to coerce her you have yourself forfeited. True, you have a hold on her by many things; but that hold could not prevent this *beau seigneur* of the barren moors from being her lover, if she choose to break her vows for him, especially if she be quite frank with him, and let him know all. Really, on my honour, placed as you are through that terrible impulsiveness which you never will abandon, I do not see how you are to step between Madame de Vassalis and this modern Bothwell, if they choose to play at Love for a little while with each other."

And Vane softly finished his citron, having spoken the most stinging words he could have strung together with the gentle, persuasive accent of a woman coaxing her best friend. Phaulcon swung round and strode up to him as he had done before, his eyes glittering with fire, his face darkly flushed.

"Perdition seize you! if you dare to make a jest of——"

"*Chut!*" said Vane, with the suavest hush that

ever fell from any lips. "Caro mio, if I speak a little lightly of your lovely Idalia, whose fault is it? —'is it not thine, O my friend?' *Altro!* keep that style for men who have not worn the badge of silver ivy with you at an opera ball. As regards this affair—he is certainly in love with her; she possibly encourages it. Unlikely, I know, but still —I repeat—possible. He is an excessively fine man! Therefore, since you cannot appear in the matter, owing to various little intricacies, what steps will you take? It is a delicate question, cher Conrad; the Countess Idalia is not a woman to brook open interference:—even with your title to give it. She is very proud! I am wholly with you, and I am not inclined to be very *simpatico* to that Arab-looking courier; but you must really be cautious how you touch him; that matter would look very ugly if it turned up against you. The idea of firing at him at all!—and then of not hitting him when you did fire! Will you not believe me how very mistaken all impulsiveness is?"

Phaulcon writhed under the negligent, gently-uttered phrases; all the pent passion in him was tenfold hotter and darker, because it was in so great a measure powerless; but he was blinded to all that Victor chose him to be blind to—namely, his com-

panion's own love for her of whom they spoke—and he dreamed of nothing in his words beyond their mutual antagonism for the man they had mutually injured.

An hour went by before they parted; left alone, the master of the dainty *palazetto* overhanging the Neapolitan waves neither peeled a citron, nor toyed lightly with this thought of Erceldoune's presence in Capri. On the contrary, admirably though he had veiled them, passions fiercer than the Greek's had lightened in him with the intelligence: the delicate colourlessness of his face flushed with a faint hot hue, his blue smiling eyes gleamed like steel, he set his teeth with a snarl like a greyhound's.

"She loves him, or she will love him;—how soft her eyes grew for him in the East! There is no assassinating him—only fools kill. There is no challenging him—that is long out of date, and, besides, he is as good a shot as any of us, or better. There is no ruining him—his fortunes are ruined already, and he is too world-wise to attempt any lies to her with a chance of success. If she choose to allow his love, who can prevent that?—Conrad cannot exert his title while the Moldavian affair hangs over his head. There is only one chance;—if he be such a fool as to take his passion seriously,

if he be ignorant of her history, and give her headlong faith. But that is such a hazard!—he is in love with her beauty, what would he care though one proved to him that she were vile as Messalina? Ah, Idalia! *bellissima* Idalia! you are haughty as a queen, and beautiful as a goddess, and dangerous as a velvet-voiced cardinal, and brightly keen as the wisest statesman, but——"

And while these thoughts strayed through his mind, he thrust the knife he held up to its haft in a pomegranate amongst the citrons; and while the red juice welled out, and the purple pulp seemed to shrink as though wounded, he plunged the blade, down and down, again and again, into the heart of the fruit, as though the action were a relief to him, as though the stab to the pomegranate were an allegory.

Yet with it a nobler feeling, a melancholy that was for the moment too deep to be able to replace regret by retaliation, came on him.

"She could have made me what she would!" he thought. "I could have won a throne for *her*. Greece swings in the air for any bold hand to seize; a turn of the wheel, and Hungary may be thrown in the lottery; free Venetia, and she would give the sceptre to her deliverer. Such things have been;

they will be again. Valerian was a common soldier, Themistocles was a bastard, Bonaparte an artillery officer—what has been may be again. They were once far farther off power than I. For myself, I could do all that is possible—with her, I would do the *impossible!*"

A smile crossed his face at the dreaming wildness of his own thoughts; his profound acumen could never so wholly desert him that he could be the prey to any emotion without some sense of ridicule and disdain even for himself; but there was more of pain at his heart than of self-contempt; he felt, even amidst the jealous bitterness that was turning his love into hatred, that he should have become a better and a truer man had Idalia returned his passion.

"I dream like a boy, or a madman!" he thought, while his hand crushed with a fierce gesture an odorous crown of orange-flowers, and flung the bruised petals out to the sea. "And yet,—with her,—I could have had force in me to make even such dreams real. If she had loved me, I would have slaved for her, dared for her, conquered for her. If she had loved me, there is nothing I would not have compassed."

Even where he stood in solitude, his lips quivered

and his forehead contracted, as under some unbearable physical pain; hardly thirty years were over his head, all the maturity of life lay before him; he felt that he had the genius in him to rule men and to carve himself a memory in history; he had the ability that would have made him a supreme and triumphant statesman; he would have been this, he would not have failed to be it, had opportunity been his. As it was, he saw the portals of fame closed to him through the disadvantages of position, and the exercise of power denied to him because he had not the primary power of money. Impatient and bitter at his exile from legitimate fields he had thrown himself into bastard politics; and adventured his fate with the secret and uncertain gambling of intrigue and conspiracy.

He hated Austria, and would have schemed night and day to humble her; beyond this feeling he had as little unison as might be with his associates; for the grandeur of theoretic republicanism, for the regeneration of Italy, for the freedom of Hungary or Poland, for the advance of the high-flown quixotism of Garibaldians, or for such poetic partisanship as breathed in "Casa Guidi Windows," he had never a single throb of sympathy. But he loved the power that it seemed to him he might obtain through

them; he loved the machinations that in their work he wove so wisely and so well; he foresaw what had not then come, the certain downfall of the Neapolitan Bourbons; he had the spirit of the gamester, and was happiest in the recklessness of chance; he had the ambition of a statesman, and he aspired, in the revival of nationalities and in the turmoil of new liberties, to seize the moment to advance himself to the prominence and the predominance which he coveted. Therefore he had embraced a party with which his temper had little akin, whose views his own mind disdained as chimerical, and whose cause only his thwarted ambitions induced him to embrace. As yet, though he held a great power in his hands over the lives of men whose projects and whose aspirations were all confided to his mercy, no substantial power had accrued to him; he had reaped but little, he had risked much, and his accumulated debts were very heavy. As he saw himself now—although in general, when in the full excitement of his life, the full complexity of its intrigues, he thought otherwise—he saw the truth: that in the flower of his manhood he was without a career, without a future; that with all his talents, graces, and fashion, he was no more than an adventurer; that bankruptcy,

pecuniary and social, might any hour fall on him; that—stripped of the brilliance of his elegant world, and of the euphuisms of a political profession—he was neither more nor less in literal fact than a gamester, a spy, and a beggared speculator in the great hazards of European destinies. In such a mood he hated himself, he hated all he was allied with, he hated the world that he had the genius and the tact to rule, yet in which he absolutely owned not even a sum enough to save him from hopeless ruin whenever the fate that hung over him should fall. And a greater bitterness than even this came on him: for once he loved; for once he felt that greater, better, truer things might have been possible for him; for once a pang, almost as sharp as agony, seized him in dreaming of what he might have been.

For once he suffered.

Every disdainful word, every contemptuous glance, every cold rebuke, of the woman he coveted with the passion of ambition, as well as with the passion of love, seemed burned into his memory and perpetually before him. He could not even make her believe that he loved her!—that was the deadliest pang of all. Hate, cruel, fierce, remorseless, the most insatiate hate of all, the hate which springs

from baffled love, wound its way into his thoughts again. Before now, he had been a cold tactician, an unscrupulous intriguer, a man who cared nothing at what cost his ends were gained, but still one who, from innate gentleness of temper and instinctive refinement of nature, had felt no sort of temptation towards grosser and darker evil; had, indeed, ridiculed it as the clumsy weapon of the ignorant and the fool; now he was in that mood when the heart of the man possessed by it cries thirstily, "Evil, be thou my good."

"I have all their cards in my hands," he thought, where he leaned, musingly flinging the buds of the gum-cistus into the water below. "A word from me —and her haughty head would lie on the stone floor of a dungeon."

The thought grew on him, strangely changing the character of his features as it worked out its serpent's undulations through his mind. His clear and sunny eyes grew cruel; his delicate lips hardened into a straight acrid line; his smooth brow darkened and contracted; this man, who had had before but the subtle, graceful swoop, the bright, unerring keenness of the falcon, now stooped lower, and had the merciless craft, the lust to devour and to destroy, of the fox.

He drew out of his pocket a letter in a miniature Italian hand; such a hand as a Machiavelli, a John de Medici, or an Acquaviva, might have written. He read it slowly, weighing every line, then put it back into its resting-place, with a certain disdain and sneer upon his face:—there was not the brain in Europe, he thought, that could outwit his.

"Austria will bid higher than that," he mused, "and the young wretch here will fall as Bourbons always fell. Six months, and he will be driven out of Naples—it would be much to be his 'Count d'Avalto' and his 'Lord Chamberlain' *then!* Fools! do they think such a bribe as that would take? If *I* make terms, it shall be with the Hapsburg; they shall pay me in proportion to my hate. They know what my enmity has meant!"

He leaned musingly over the marble parapet of his terrace, the lines of cruelty and of craft sinking deeper into his fair unworn face; even to him, free from all such weaknesses as an unprofitable honour, and not unwilling to sell his hate, as he would have sold his intellect, for power, even to him there was something bitter and shameful in the thought of treason—something that made him recoil from the desertion of those who had been allied to him so long, and acceptance of those who had so long had

his deepest hatred; something that made the very silence of the Italian noon, the very melody of the Italian seas, the very cadence of a boat-song, that echoed dreamily over the waves from a distance, that only let its closing cadence, "Libertà! O Libertà!" come upon his ear, seem like a reproach to him by whom she—this Italy in chains, this Italy ruined through her own fatal dower of a too great beauty—was about to be betrayed.

There never yet was the man so hardened that he could play the part, and take the wage of an Iscariot, without this pang.

"She does it," he said, in his teeth, with a sophism that ere now he would have disdained. "She might have made me what she would; she chooses to make me——"

"A traitor," was not uttered even clearly in his thoughts; who thinks out clearly such thoughts as these to the last iota of their own damnable meaning? A shiver, too, ran through him as he recalled a risk that even his fertile statecraft could not avail to ward off from him, the step he meditated once being taken;—the risk of the stab-thrust in the back from the poinard of the "Brotherhood, which even in this day, even in the streets of polished European capitals, strikes soon or late, howso-

ever high they stand in a traitor's guilty purples, those who have broken the oath of those secret bonds.

Then he laughed; a smile in which the last instinct of his better nature died.

"Faugh! my good Italians shall believe that I join the White Coats to serve Venetia: my blind Viennese shall think I wear a fair face to Italy to entrap her confidence for them. It is so easy to dupe both. And *she*—Naples will suffice for that. A whisper of mine to Monsignor Giulio, and scorn, and wit, and statesmanship, and wealth, and all the cozenries of her loveliness, all the resources of her art, will avail her nothing. There, in the Vicaria, what will she do with her beauty, and her kingdom, and her lovers, and the insolence of her pride, *then*? Better have shared a crown with me!"

As his thoughts formed themselves into ruthless shape that dulled remorse, and stole swiftly and surely on the evil path which tempted him, the whole man in him changed: the gentleness of his nature grew into fierce lust, the unscrupulous subtlety of his intellect was merged into a deadly thirst for retaliation. On the woman who had scornfully repelled him he could have dealt a hundred deaths.

Yet for one moment more the love he had borne her vanquished him again, and he remembered nothing but its pain, its wrong, and its rejection; for one moment more he gave himself up to the misery, the weakness, the shame, as he held it, of this fool's idolatry;—it was the one thing alone, loathingly as he contemned it, that could have made him a better and a truer man.

His head dropped till it sank down on to his arms, that were folded on the marble ledge, and a sharp quiver like a woman's weeping shook him from head to foot.

"I would have forgiven her all—even her scorn," he thought, "if only she would have *believed* that I loved her!"

CHAPTER III.

"MONSIGNORE."

In one of the fairest nooks of the Bay of Naple stood a palace in the perfection of taste, from the frescoes on its walls within to the delicate harebell-like campanile, that threw its slim shaft aloft, looking towards Amalfi. Fronting the sea, a small oval-shaped pier ran out into the water, with a broad flight of steps terminating it; above this, the natural growth of the country had hung a self-woven screen of orange and myrtle boughs; a place of embarkation, or disembarkation, lonely, secure, and unlooked on by anything save lofty Anacapri far above, hanging like an eagle's nest among the clouds. In the shadow of the evening a boat stopped there, a man alighted, dismissed the rowers, and went on along the length of the little quay to an arched door of curious cinque-cento work; it was the private entrance of the *palazetto*, which, despite the humility of the diminutive it was given, stretched up and around in wing

on wing in stately architecture, and numbered ninety chambers.

He was admitted, and entered the house, lighted with a flood of light, crowded with a glittering suite of attendants of all grades, and seemingly endless in its vastness, with chamber and corridor opening out one on another in wearying succession of splendour, relieved from monotony, however, by the exquisite pieces of sculpture and of painting that studded the whole like a second Pitti. Some thirty of these corridors and reception-rooms ended in a little chamber, small at least by comparison, hung with purple velvet, its furniture of silver and of ebony, its only painting a superb Ecce Homo of Leonardo's, its windows narrow and lancet-shaped, the whole now illumined with a soft amber light;—this was the sanctuary of Monsignore Villaflor.

Monsignore rose with affability—he was ever affable—and advanced with courtly grace. Monsignore was a handsome and portly man, with the beautiful Neapolitan eyes and the beautiful Neapolitan face; a little losing the symmetry of his figure now, and over his fiftieth year, but a very noble person still. He wore the violet robes of a bishop, and on his hand sparkled the bishop's amethyst ring.

Looking at him, it was hard to believe that the race of prince-bishops had died out, for he was a very princely person. He was not like St. Philip Neri, he was not like Reginald de la Pole, he was not like Acacius, or François Xavier, or the great martyred man who looked across to England with those sublime words—" Terram Anglicæ video, et favente Domino terram intrabo, sciens tamen certissimè quod mihi immineat passio"—and kept his oath, and went. Monsignore was not like any of these; but he was excessively like Cardinal Bembo, he was excessively like Cardinal Mazarin.

Victor Vane bowed before him with the grace of a courtier and the reverence of a son of the Church; with the Paris literati he was a Cartesian, with the Germans a Spinozian, with the English men of science a Rationalist, a Pantheist, a Monotheist, or a Darwinian, with the Mountain an Atheist, as best suited; but with the Monsignori he was always deferential to the Faith. They met as those who have often met for the advancement of mutual aims, but they met also as those who have to play a delicate game with each other, in which the cards must be studiously concealed. Both were perfect diplomatists. The game opened gracefully, courteously, cautiously, with a little trifling on either

side; but they approached their respective points in it more quickly, less warily, than usual, for he who before had but played into the hands of Monsignore to betray him, now came to play into his hands with sincerity.

This was not the first by many audiences the brilliant Bishop, the favourite of the Vatican, had given to one who had been until the night before this the deadliest foe of his Church, of his king, of his projects, of his policies; for Giulio Villaflor had been duped despite all his finesses, and had believed the gentle and adroit Englishman his tool, while he was, in truth, the tool himself. Monsignore had his silken webs over Italy, and France, and Austria, and Spain; Monsignore had his secret *sbirri* of the ablest; Monsignore knew everything; was the lover of great ladies who played the spy in palaces, never gave a Benedicite without some diplomatic touch, never administered the Viaticum but what the Church was the richer for a legacy, never yet was compromised by a lie, yet never yet was driven to the vulgarity of the truth;—but even Monsignore had been trepanned by Victor Vane. The secret of the defeat was this; Giulio Villaflor loved power well, but he loved other things as well; the pleasures of the table, the scent of pure wines,

and the gleam of almond eyes and snowy bosoms. His opponent had loved nothing but power; until now, for the first time, he loved a woman and loved a revenge. Hence, now for the first time, also, he played into Villaflor's hands.

A dusky red tinged the pale clear brown cheek of the Bishop, and in his eyes was the gleam that those who knew him had learned to tremble sorely at when too few were found for the dungeons of the Vicaria, or out of the crowds of Easter-day one face dared look a frank defiance at him while the Silver Trumpets sounded.

"All the revolutionists have not menaced us and braved us as this one woman has done!" he muttered. "All the rebels of Sardinia and Sicily have not the danger in them that Idalia has. The man is bad enough, but she——"

"Conrad can be bought," put in Vane, gently; there was, indeed, an overstrained quietude in his face and in his tone. "Name the price your Grace will give; I will purchase him for you to-morrow."

Monsignore bent his head with a slight smile.

"Promise what you will, I can confide perfectly in your discretion!" he said, with his suave dignity of grace; he reserved to himself the right to refuse ratification of the promises when the fish

should be fairly baited and hooked. "*He* is but a secondary matter—can *she* be bought?"

"No!" Into the calm immutability of her betrayer's voice there glided a half sullen, half bitter, yet withal admiring savageness; he was recalling to memory the imperial disdain with which she had swept from him the night before, the indifference with which she had disregarded alike his entreaties and his threats. "What could be offered her that could eclipse what she has? She has wealth—she has dominion—she has a power wider than yours!"

The last words were almost bluntly uttered; for the moment he felt a thrill of triumph in flinging the splendour and the influence of the woman by whom he had been rejected in the teeth of even the purples and the pomps of Eternal Rome.

The dusky red glowed slightly brighter in Monsignore's cheek, a flush of anger; he waved his delicate white hand with an expressive action.

"While they last! But if she had choice between retaining these—under *our* pleasure—and losing them—say in the casemates of the Capuano yonder; what then, my son? She would yield?"

"She would never yield."

He answered calmly, still with that restrained

and impassive serenity on him; by the tone, he said as though he had spoken it that no menace, no pang, no death, would make Idalia what he was now —a renegade.

"*Altro!* she is a woman?" said Monsignore, with the mockery of the Neapolitan laugh in the protrusion of his handsome under lip.

"We waste words, Monsignore," said Victor Vane, abruptly. "She is not like other women."

"Contumacious! Then she must feel the arm of the Church." The words were spoken without any ruffle of that silken and unctuous tone in which Giulio Villaflor whispered softest trifles in the ear of Austrian and Parisian beauty, but in the lustrous eyes gleamed a glance cold as ice, fierce as lust, dangerous as steel. "My son, tell us all that you know once more."

"All that I know!" There was a smile that flickered across his features one moment, though it passed too instantaneously for it to be even caught by Villaflor. "That would take hours. I can give you heads, and bring you proofs as you require them. I know that she arranged the escape of the two Ronaldeschi from the galleys. I know that she has effected the flight of Carradino from his prison; I know that through her twenty thousand muskets

will find their way to Poland, and the same into Tuscany, by routes that all your *sbirri* will never discover; I know that it was at her salons in Paris that the war of Sicily was first organised; I know that she is the life, the soul, the core, the prophetess of every national movement. I know that she holds the threads of every insurrectionary movement from the Apennines to the Caucasus——"

Monsignore made a slight gesture of impatience; while shading his eyes with the hand on which the episcopal amethyst glittered, he narrowly watched the immutable countenance of his companion.

"We know all these, and much more," he said, with an accent of disappointed irritation. "If we can once secure her person, we have witness enough against her to consign her twenty times over to the *peine forte et dure*, to the prison, or the convent cell, for her lifetime. Idalia!—she is Satanas!—you have more to tell than these stories, *figlio mio?*"

"Or I would not have wearied your Grace to-night," assented Vane, still with that calm and undeviating air as of one who, having learnt a recitation by heart, mechanically, yet unwaveringly, repeats it out. "Yes, I know more; I know that she is—here.'

"*Here!*'

Despite the perfect self-command and the trained immobility of the courtly Churchman, surprise and exultation for once escaped him, uncontrolled and unconcealed; his eyes lightened, his hand grasped the ivory and ebon elbow of his state chair, his lips moved rapidly.

"Here! She has the daring of a Cæsar!"

And there was in the words an accent of compelled admiration that was, perhaps, from such an antagonist as this great Priest of Rome, the highest homage that Idalia had ever yet extorted; for it was homage wrung out in unwilling veneration from the hatred and the cunning of an implacable foe.

Vane started, as though stung, and turned his face towards the grand dark canvas of the Ecce Homo, away from the fall of the light. When the astute Churchman, who had been his own hated enemy and duped tool so long, and whom he now used as the weapon of his vengeance—when the haughty Catholic, who pursued her with the rancour of his creed, and with the unpardoning bitterness of a mighty and unscrupulous priesthood against those who dare to defy and to disdain it—when, from the unwilling admiration of Giulio Villaflor, this tribute was wrung to the lofty and unconquerable courage of the woman whom he had come hither to betray

into the unsparing hands of her foes, he—the traitor—felt for one moment sunk into depths of shame; felt for one moment the full depravity and vileness of that abyss into which thwarted ambition and covetous revenge had drawn him.

Yet if he would have repented and retracted, he could not; and would not have done so if he could. The word was spoken; he had delivered her over into the power of her adversaries, had delivered over her beautiful neck to the brand, her proud head to the cord, her wealth to the coffers of the Bourbon, her loveliness to the mercy of Rome, her life to the hell of the Dungeon. It was done; and still as he turned to the dark shadow of the Leonardo with that loathing of the light which murderers feel when every ray that touches them seems to them as though seeking out their crime, he would not have undone it if he could. For he had loved her, and now hated her with a great insatiate hate; so near these passions lie together.

"Here!" echoed Villaflor once more, while his large eyes lighted with the fire of the tiger, though that fire was subdued under the droop of his velvet lashes. "In Naples! And I not to know it?"

In that single sentence was told a terrible reckoning that waited for those of his people—of his spies

—who had been thus treacherous; or for the carelessness which had withheld from him the near presence of the woman whom he had watched, waited, plotted, bribed, schemed to entrap with all the intricacies and resources of his astute intellect and far-spread meshes, for so long.

"In Capri—and without disguise," answered Vane, turning his head from a seemingly negligent glance at the Leonardo; his eyes were quite clear, his countenance quite frank, his smile gentle and delicately satirical as usual. He was now attuned to his part again, and the evil in him gaining the sole mastery upon him, made him take a Borgian pleasure in thus preparing drop on drop, with the precision and the genius of science, the poison that was to consume and wither the brilliant life of the woman he had vainly loved. "Remember! first, she is unaware that you know all your Grace could alone have known through me—she is unaware that there are any proofs against her in the possession of the Neapolitan Court; secondly, she is one to whom the meaning of fear and submission is unknown; she claims the Greek blood of Artemisia—she has Artemisian daring; thirdly, she has so attached the Marinari to her, that, good subjects and brainless beasts though these Capriotes be, she could scarce

be touched on their shore with impunity; fourthly and chiefly, so many swords would leap out of their scabbards for Idalia, despite the many dead men who have, dying, cursed her, so world-wide and so well known is the dominion of her beauty, that I believe she thinks that none of the governments dare touch her. She relies on this: that Sicily is in revolt, Naples in ferment; one public act, such as these poor, blind, contumacious mules call tyranny, done to a woman whose loveliness could excite the populace, and whose genius could command it like Idalia's, and the crisis which is, as even you confess, often so near, might come, despite you and the Palace, with a thunder you could not still by the thunder of the Vatican, Holy Father."

There was a bitter irony hidden under the gentle courtliness of the words, and of the apologetic softness of the smile with which they were uttered. He had been a foe and a traitor to Giulio Villaflor so long, that he could not at once abandon the refined pleasure of thrusting silken taunts against that silken Churchman. The words lashed the passions of the Neapolitan as was purposed; that dusky scarlet glow came again into his cheek, his nostrils dilated, his fine lips quivered haughtily; for the in-

stant he lost the unctuousness of the Palace Priest, and had the grand arrogance of a Wolsey, a Richelieu, or a Granvella.

He moved as though to rise from his ivory chair —as though to go into the van of combat for the Church and for the Nobles, like the warrior-bishops of the past.

"Do you think I fear the people!—a beast that crouches to the whip, and kicks the fallen, that cringes when its paunch is empty, and bullies when it is bold with a full feed! *I* fear the people! By the Mother of God, I would teach them such obedience that they should never breathe, but by my will!"

For the moment there flashed out the old spirit of the Colonna and the Este in the unusual outbreak of proud passion; arrogant, cruel, and iron though the words were, Giulio Villaflor, as he spoke them, was a grander and a better man, because a truer and a bolder, than in the velvet sweetness, the courtly maskings of his palatial sanctities, of his episcopal voluptuousness, of his blending of courtier, statesman, saint, and roué. He who heard, smiled that delicate smile that meant a malice and an irony so infinite, yet never betrayed this unless it were desired to be betrayed.

"Then,' he asked, softly, "you would dare arrest her in Capri?"

The eyes of Monsignore flashed upon him.

"*Dare* is not a word to use to Rome!"

It was the haughty defiance and self-deification of the Pontifical Power roused, as it had roused of old against Emperors and Kings, rebels in the Cloisters and rebels in the Courts, against the sceptre of Barbarossa as against the science of Abélard, of the Power which refuses to see that this day is not as that, which denies that the dawn has shone because its fiat has gone forth for darkness to endure.

"Your Grace cannot think that I used the word save as suggestive of what is expedient. Your object is to make the Countess Vassalis a political prisoner. Is it advisable to allow her the halo of political martyrdom? Do you wish to give the enemies of the Church and King the power to compare you to a second Cyril, and her to a second Hypatia?"

Giulio Villaflor smiled a very expressive, a very devilish smile, mellow though it was.

"No. I have no desire to deify another Greek courtesan."

Was the word as foul slander to the living Athenian as it was to the dead Alexandrian?

His smile was answered in his listener's eyes; in that instant Victor almost forgave him the animosities of lengthened years, in that instant almost loved him and admired him; their natures were so kindred, they could stab so well with the same weapon.

"Precisely!" he said, with that persuasive tact which, never save once, under the contempt of Idalia, had deserted him. "Then pardon me, Monsignore; but will it not be well to conduct this matter with as little publicity as may be? Where there is danger for her, there will she remain; I know what she is. She has all the finesse of a Greek, but she has none of a Greek's cowardice. Moreover, it is to secure Viana that she is here (we will come to his affair afterwards); he is all but gained to her, and he is rash and reckless to foolhardiness. At his villa of Antina, in the interior, there is, the day after to-morrow, a reunion of the 'Alpe al Mar' confederates, and, under cover of a masquerade, its political purpose has been kept strictly secret. Had even you not known of it through me, you would never have heard of it in any other light than as one of Carlo's splendid eccentricities and extravagant entertainments. There is a password which, also, but through me, your Grace's choicest experts

would not have been able to surprise. Ah, Monsignore, there is mine under mine; government spies are too often content to believe that when they have explored the topmost one they know all! There, at Antina, will be the Countess Vassalis, and not she alone: Caffradali, Aldino, Villari, Laldeschi, all the Neapolitans who are written in your Livre Rouge will meet. You may strike a great stroke at one blow; by day-dawn Viana and his glittering maskers may fill the Castel Capuano, if you will. Ask for what proofs against them you choose, you can have sufficient to justify the galleys for life against one and all of them; out of their own words shall you convict them, and, once yours, how shall this lawless Empress, this queenly Democrat, this patrician with the Marseillaise on her lips, this liberator with the pride of all the Empires in her heart, ever escape again to mine your thrones with her arts, to sap your creeds with her ironies, to arm your enemies with her riches, to overthrow your policies with her genius, to dare, to mock, to scheme, to revolutionise, to rule—to be, in one word, Idalia? Where will her power be when the same fetters as Poerio's hang on her wrists, where her loveliness when day and night the skies alone look on it from a chink in a dungeon wall, where

her triumphs and her victories when the felon's branding-iron eats its hot road into her breast? She will be dead—as dead as in her grave."

The persuasive eloquence with which nature had endowed him left his tongue with a silken stealing sound, like the gliding movement of some serpentine thing, made more ornate in its eloquence by the richness of the Italian words he used. But there was beneath it the hiss of hatred, the ravenous thirst of desired vengeance, the lust that painted to itself her doom, and gloated on its own pictures with a hellish pleasure.

Giulio Villaflor caught that accent, and thought, with his acute trained wisdom:

"He has loved her—he will be true to us, then. There is no hate so sure-footed and so relentless as *that* hate."

"*Figlio mio,*" he said, with his mellowest smile, resting his glance so cruel yet so caressing on the man who henceforward would be no longer his master, but his instrument, once having let him glean his secret, "you should have been in our Church; you have an orator's powers. How many souls you would have won!"

"Pardon me, your Eminence! it is more amusing work, more to my taste at least—to lose them."

Monsignore smiled a gentle reproof.

"'Your Eminence!' You give me too high a title, my son."

"Forgive me a mistake the world will soon ratify! I only anticipate the future by a month or two."

Giulio Villaflor was flattered; courted though he was, he was not above the bait to his vanity and his ambition. The Cardinal's hat was the goal of his daring yet wary desires, and in his own mind he foresaw himself soon or late a second Leo X; Pontifex Maximus in all the ancient power of the Papal tiara.

He let his eyes rest for a long moment on those of his companion; they were the deep, soft, full Italian eyes, like the brown, gentle, luminous eyes of the oxen of the Apennines; they could be tender in love as those of Venus Pandemos, they could be spiritual in religion as those of Leonardo's John, but also, they could be impenetrable as those of Talleyrand, they could be piercing in meaning and in discovery as those of Aquaviva, when, instead of the smile of the lover, or the benignity of the priest, he wore the mask of the diplomatist and politician.

"We understand each other, *figlio mio?*" he said,

gently, while the violet gem of the episcopal ring glittered like the glance of a basilisk.

"We do."

They understood each other: and thus silently, while the aromatic light shone on the Vinci Passion, and without the melody of the waters beat sweet measure against the swaying orange-boughs, the seal was set to the unholy barter that betrayed a woman, and played the Iscariot to Liberty.

CHAPTER IV.

"A TEMPLE NOT MADE WITH HANDS."

The day on which Conrad Phaulcon left her was just in the mellow heat of noon, yet not oppressive where the great overhanging rocks with drooping masses of entwined foliage shut out the sun; and where in the privacy of her villa gardens Idalia came, leaving her prosecutor to his half triumphant and half mortified solitude.

Alone, she sank down on the stone bench that overlooked the sea, while the hound Sulla was couched at her feet; alone, a profound weariness and dejection broke down the pride which had never drooped before her foe, while a passionate hatred quivered over the fairness of her face.

"Oh God!" she said, half aloud in the unconscious utterance of her thoughts, "and I once believed in that man as simple women believe in their religion! Fool—fool—fool! And yet I was so young then; how could I know what I worked for

myself?—how could I know what depths of vileness were in him?"

The dog before her, lying like a lion at rest, with his muzzle down, lifted his head with a loud bay of wrath, and a snarling growl of menace and defiance: he heard the footsteps of Count Conrad passing downward on the other side of the villa towards the beach, and he hated him with all a hound's unforgiving intensity; once, months before, Phaulcon had been so incautious, in a fit of passion, as to strike the stately Servian monarch, and, but for Idalia, would have been torn in pieces for the indignity. Sulla had never pardoned it.

His mistress laid her hand upon his neck, and her teeth set slightly, while her splendid head was lifted with a haughty action that followed the colour of her thoughts.

"Let him be, Sulla. The man who is *false* is beneath rebuke or revenge!"

And to those who should have known her rightly that proud contempt would have been more than any vengeance she could have given. She sat there many moments—moments that rolled on till they grew more than hours; her eyes watching the boats that passed and repassed below in the Capriote waters, her thoughts far from the scene around her.

Her life had been changeful, varied, spent in many countries, and conversant with many things; its memories were as numerous as the sands, but what was written on them was not to be effaced as it could be effaced on the shore. The reverse of Eugénie de Guerin, who was "always hoping to live, and never lived," she had lived only too much, only too vividly. She had had pleasure in it, power in it, triumph in it; but now the perfume and the effervescence of the wine were much evaporated, and there was bitterness in the cup, and a canker in the roses that had crowned its brim. For—— she was not free.

Like the Palmyran queen she felt the fetters underneath the purples, and the jewelled links of gold she wore were symbols of captivity; moreover, conscience had wakened in her, and would not sleep.

She rose at last; she knew many would visit her during the day, and she was, besides, no lover of idle dreams or futile regrets; brilliant as Aspasia, and classically cultured as Héloise, she was not a woman to let her hours drift on in inaction or in fruitless reverie; no days were long for her even now that she rebelled against the tenor and the purpose of her life.

With the hound beside her she left the cliff, and moved slowly, for the heat was at its height, backward towards her house; a step rapidly crushed the cyclomen, the leaves were swept quickly aside, and in her path stood Erceldoune. The meeting was sudden to both. It was impossible that either could for the moment have any memory save that of the words with which they had so lately parted; over the bronze of his face the blood flushed hotly, from the fairness of hers it faded; she paused, and for the moment her worldly grace forsook her. She stood silent while he bowed before her.

"Madame, I had your promise that you would receive me; not, I hope, in vain?"

The words were slight, were ceremonious: she had forbidden him all others; but in his voice were the feverish entreaty, the idolatrous slavery to her, which, repressed in speech, were so intense in his own heart.

"I do not break my promises," she said, gently; "and—and you will not do so either. Are you staying in Capri, that you are here so early?"

His eyes looked into hers with a mute, imploring suffering that touched her more deeply than any words could have done.

"While I have strength to keep my word, I will. I cannot say my strength will endure long—you put it to a hard test. How hard, God only knows!"

She stood silent a moment; then she moved on with a negligent dignity.

"Pardon me—I put it to no test. I but told you the terms on which our friendship can continue. I told you, too, that it were better ended at once. I say so now."

There was far more of melancholy than of coldness in the answer, chill though it might be. One long step brought him to her side as she passed onward, and his voice was low in her ear.

"We said enough of that last night! I will keep my word while I may; till I break it, I claim yours. Make my misery if you must, but let me cheat myself out of it one little hour more."

She turned her head slightly; and he saw that unpitying though her words were, her eyes were humid.

"If I could spare you any pain, I would!—believe me, believe that at least," she said, with an intonation that was almost passionate, almost appealing; she could not have this man, whose life

she had rescued from the grave, and over whose agony she had watched in the Carpathian solitudes, think that she could wanton with his wretchedness, or be careless of his sorrow.

"Then—do what else you will with my life, but do not bid me leave you?"

She was silent, and she shook her head with a gesture of dissent; she knew that he prepared himself but added pain, but more enduring suffering, the longer he deceived himself with the thought or the simulation of happiness. Yet, she asked herself, bitterly, why was she bound to send him from her as though she were plague-stricken? —why, since it was his will to linger in her presence, should she be compelled to drive him out of it?

Her honour, her pity, her conscience, her reason said—why delude him with a passing and treacherous hour of hope? Her heart pleaded for him —perhaps pleaded for herself;—her mood changed swiftly, though her character never; a natural nonchalance was combined in her with the dignity and depth of her nature. She was at all times too epicurean not to let life take its course, and heed but little of the morrow.

She gave a half-impatient, half-weary sigh.

"Well! be it so, if you will; for to-day, at the least," she said, with the accent of one who throws thought away, and resigns the reins to chance. "You stay in Capri? Have you breakfasted?"

"I thank you, yes; in a fishing-hut on the beach yonder."

"That must have been but a poor meal. I know what Capriote fare is—some smoked tunny and some dried onions! Come within."

He obeyed her, and forgot all else in the charm of that sweet present hour.

She had repulsed his love; she would have done so again had it been uttered; she had told herself that this man's gallant life must not be cheated into union with hers, this fearless heart must not be broken beneath her foot; though she should have spared no other, she vowed to spare him, over whose perils she had watched while her hand held the living water to his dying lips. In what she now did, therefore, she erred greatly; but it was very hard for her not to err. She was used to reign, and was accustomed to ɔllow her own pleasure, answering to none; she had known the world till she was satiated with it; she was in this moment utterly weary of her associates, weary almost of herself. There was a certain repose, a certain lulling peace,

in the chivalrous and ennobling adoration she received from Erceldoune. She knew him to be a high-spirited gentleman, candid to a fault, loyal to rashness; with brave lion's blood in his veins and a noble knightly faith in his love; beyond all cowardice of suspicion, and true unto death to his word. It was as strange to her, as it was sweet, to find such a nature as this; stranger and sweeter than any can know who have not also known life as she knew it—it was like a sweep of free, fresh, sea-scented Apennine air, stirred by the bold west wind, after the heat, the press, the bon-mots, the equivokes, and the gas-glitter of a Florentine Veglione.

It is difficult for any who survey mankind deeply and widely, to retain their belief in the existence of an honest man; but if they meet one, they value him far more than they who affect to imagine honesty as natural amongst men as beards.

The hock, the chocolate, the fish, the fruit, were scarce tasted as he took them that morning: he knew nothing but the shaded repose of the quiet chamber, the dream-like enchantment of the hour, the form before him, where through the green tracery of the climbing vine, the golden sun fell

across her brow and at her feet. He was almost silent; his love had a great humility, and made it seem to him hopeless that his hand could ever have title even to wander among the richness of her hair.

To have right to win her lips to close on his, it seemed to him that a man should have done such great and glorious things as should have made his life

> A tale of high and passionate thoughts
> To their own music chanted.

The full heat of the noon was just passed, the bells of afternoon vespers were sounding from a little campanile that rose above a jumbled mass of rock and foliage, grey jutting wall, and pale green olive woods; through a break in the foliage the precipitous road was just seen, and a group of weather-browned peasant women, with the silver *spadella* in their hair, going upward to the chapel of S. Maria del Mare. Idalia rose, and followed them with her eyes. In an unformed wish, born of weary impatience, she almost envied them their mule-like round of life, their simple, dogged, childish faith, their nurtured indifference alike to pleasure and to pain.

"That animal life is to be envied, perhaps?" she

said, rather to herself than to him. "Their pride is centred in a silver hair-pin; their conscience is committed to a priest; their credulity is contented with tradition; their days are all the same, from the rising of one sun to another; they do not love, they do not hate; they are like the ass that they drive, follow one patient routine, and only take care for their food;—perhaps they are to be envied!"

He rose, too, and came beside her.

"Do not belie yourself! *You* would be the last to say so. You would not lose 'those thoughts that wander through eternity,' to gain in exchange the peace from ignorance of the peasant or the dullard?"

She turned her face to him, with its most beautiful smile on her lips and in her eyes.

"No, I would not: you are right. Better to know the secrets of the gods, even though with pain, than to lead the dull, brute life, though painless. It is only in our dark hours that we would sell our souls for a dreamless ease."

"Dark hours! *You* should not know them. Ah, if you would but trust me with some confidence—if there were but some way in which I could serve you——"

Her eyes met his with gratitude, even while she gave him a gesture of silence. She thought how little could the bold, straight stroke of this man's frank chivalry cut through the innumerable and intricate chains that entangled her own life. The knightly Excalibur could do nothing to sever the filmy but insoluble meshes of secret intrigues.

"It is a Saint's day: I had forgotten it!" she said, to turn his words from herself, while the bell of the campanile still swung through the air. "I am a pagan, you see—I do not fancy that you care much for creeds yourself?"

"Creeds? I wish there were no such word. It has only been a rallying-cry for war—an excuse for the bigot to burn his neighbour!"

"No. Long ago, under the Andes, Nezahualcoytl held the same faith that Socrates had vainly taught in the Agora; and Zengis Khan knew the truth of theism like Plato; yet the world has never generally learnt it! It is the religion of nature—of reason. But the faith is too simple and too sublime for the multitude. The mass of minds needs a religion of mythus, legend, symbolism, and fear. What is impalpable, escapes it; and it must give an outward and visible shape to its belief, as it gives in its art a human form to its deity. Come, since we agree

in our creed, I will take you to my temple—a temple not made with hands!"

She smiled on him as she spoke, and a dizzy sweetness filled his life. He did not ask if she had forgotten her words of the past night—he did not ask whether in this lull of dreamy joy and passionate hope there might be but a keener deadliness of disappointment. He was with her; that sufficed. She went with him out into the brightness of the day, down the rocky paths, under shining walls of glossy ilex-leaves and drooping orange clusters of scented blossom. In the fair wild beauty of Capri, —the tranquillity unbroken except by the lapping of the waves far down below and the distant echo of some sea-song, the sunlight that flooded land and water, the shadows sleeping lazily here and there where the lemon and citron boughs were netted into closest luxuriance,—the world seemed formed for love alone.

Since she had bidden his passion die in silence, why did she let him linger here?

He did not ask; he only gave himself to the magic of the present hour, to the sound of her voice as it thrilled in his ear, to the touch of her hair as he lifted from it some low hanging orange branch, to the sorcery of her presence.

The cool sea lay, a serene world of waters, scarcely ruffled by a breeze, and glancing with all the marvellous brilliance of colouring that northern air never can know. The boat waited in a creek, floating there under so dark a shadow from the drooping boughs of lemon and acacia, that it was almost in twilight: a few strokes of the oars, and it swept out of the brown ripples, flinging up their surf against the rocks, into the deep blue of the sunlit bay; below, above, around on every side, colour in all its glory, all its variety, all its harmony and contrast, melting into one paradise in the warmth of the summer day.

"I love the sea more dearly than any land. It is incarnate freedom!" she said, rather to herself than him, as she leant slightly over the boat, filling her hand with the water, till its drops sparkled like the sapphires in her rings. There was a certain aching tone in her words that sent a pang to his heart: it was the envy of freedom. Was she not, then, free?

"That is the charm my own moors have—the mere sense of liberty they give. Barren though they be, if you were to see them——"

His voice was unsteady over the last sentence. He thought of the dead glories of his race, of the

squandered wealth and the fallen power that once would have been his by right; his to lay at her feet, his to make his fortunes equal with his name.

"You love liberty?" she said, suddenly, almost abruptly, save that all in her was too exquisitely harmonised, too full of languor and repose ever to become abrupt. "Tell me, would you not think *any* sin justified to obtain it?"

"Justified?"

"Yes, justified!" she said, impatiently, while her eyes flashed on him under their drooped lids. "What! do you know the world so well, and yet do not know that there have been crimes before now glorious as the morning, and virtues base as the selfish chillness that they sprang from? What was Corday's crime—what was Robespierre's virtue? Answer me. Would you think it justified, or not?"

A flush rose over his face; he thought, he felt, that it was of her own liberty she spoke.

"Do not ask me!" he said, hurriedly. "You would make me a sophist in *your* cause. Evil is never justified, though done that good may come; but to serve you, to succour you, I fear that I should scorn no sin, nor turn from any!"

The words were almost wild, but they were terribly true. Though perhaps the less likely thus to fall because he knew his own weakness, he felt that the inflexible justice, the honesty of purpose, the unerring loyalty to knightly creeds, which were so ingrained in him that they were scarce so much principle as instinct, might reel, and break, and be forgotten if once this woman whispered:—

"Sin—and sin for me!"

He thought he could deny her nothing—not even his sole heritage of honour—if she could bend to woo it from him. A look of pain passed for one moment over her face. She thought of him as he had lain in his extremity, while her hand had swept back the dark luxuriance of his hair, and his eyes had looked upward into hers without sense or sight. Was it possible that she had saved him then only to deal him worse hereafter? She shook the sea-drops from her hand with a certain imperious, impatient movement, and replied to him with the haughty negligence of her occasional manner.

"I asked you an impersonal question—no more; and if you cannot frame a sophism contentedly, you are terribly behind your age. We have rhetoric

that proves fratricide only a *droit d'aînesse*, and logic that demonstrates a lie the natural right of man!"

He answered her nothing. She saw a look come on his face mortified, wounded, incredulous. There was something in her words, and in the accent of their utterance, that seemed to chill him to the bone, and freeze his very heart. The stately simplicity of his own character could not follow the manifold phases of hers. Moreover, he had spoken in the fervour of passion: she had answered him with what, if it were not half scorn, half cruelty, trenched close on both.

A certain pitying light glowed in her eyes as they read this, the languid and ironic smile passed from her lips, she sighed slightly, though it was half with a laugh that she spoke:

"Caro es, non Angelus.

Do you not remember the old Latin line? Be sure that you may say it to any human life you meet; above all, to a woman's! There is no angel amongst us; some faint rays of purer light here and there; that is the uttermost, and that so often darkened! I will give you the surest guard against the calamity of disappointment. Learn to say, and

realise, of all you fancy fairest or noblest, this only—'*Non Angelus.*'"

He looked at her wistfully still; the temper of the man had too much directness, too much singleness, to be able to divine the veiled meanings of her varying words, the seductive changes of her altered tones: he only knew that he felt for her what he had felt for no other woman.

"Non Angelus?" he repeated. "Well!—might I not also be answered with its companion line, 'Homo es, non es Deus?' I am no sophist; you have reproached me with it. Sophism is to me the shameful refuge of cowards who dare not own themselves criminals; but—but—even while I condemned what I loved, my love would not change; though she erred, *I* would not forsake her. 'Non Angelus?' What knell to love is there there? It is but to admit a common bond of weakness and mortality."

His voice was low and unsteady as he spoke, but it had a great sweetness in it; the love he was forbidden to declare for her he uttered to her in them.

She stooped and leant her hand over the side again, toying with the coolness of the water. His words had touched her keenly, and their loyalty

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paradise; where the world was dead, but the spirit of God moved on the waters.

Passion was stilled here; love was silenced; the chastened solemnity, the purity of its mysterious divinity, had no affinity with the fevered dreams and sensuous sweetness of mortal desires. The warm poetic voluptuous light and colour of the land that they had left were the associates of passion; here it was hushed, and cast back in mute and nameless pain on its own knowledge of its own mortality; here there were rather felt "the pain of finite hearts that yearn" for things dreamt of and never found; the vagueness of far-reaching futile Promethean thirst; the impulse, and the despair, of immortality.

The boat paused in the midst of the still, violet, lake-like water. Where he lay at her feet, he looked upward to her through the ethereal light that floated round them, and seemed to sever them from earth.

"Would to God I could die now!"

The words broke unconsciously from him rather in the instinct of the moment than in conscious utterance. Her eyes met his, in them that dreamy and beautiful light that seemed to float in unshed tears. She laid her hand one moment on his

forehead with a touch so soft that it was a caress.

"Hush!—for what is worth life in us there will be no death!"

And the boat swept, slowly and noiselessly, through the crystal clearness of the waters, through the cold and solemn loveliness, through the twilight of the blue sea-mists, down into the narrow darkened archway of the farther distance, and out once more into the golden splendour of the living day—even as a human life, if men's dreams be true, may pass through the twilight shadows of earth down into the darkness of the valley of death, thence only to soar onward into the glory of other worlds, the radiance of other days.

She stooped to him slightly as the vessel swept away into the breadth and brightness of the bay.

"Is not my temple nobler than those that are built by men?"

He looked upward at her with a look in his eyes that had never been there before.

"You have taught me to-day what I never learned in all the years of my life!"

And the boat passed softly, silently, out of the sea-built temples that the waves had worn, out of the

stillness and solemnity of that aërial light, onward through the heavy perfumes wafted from the shore, onward to where the Syren Isles laughed in their smiling loveliness upon the waters, half of earth and half of heaven.

CHAPTER V.

"CRAVEST THOU ARCADY? BOLD IS THY CRAVING. I SHALL NOT CONTENT IT."

THE day had sunk away into evening before the boat returned; the splendour of the Capri moonlight was on sea and land, on the grey terraces of olives, with their silvery plumes of foliage, and on the green vines, clustering in the early summer over the steep stairs of rock and the stones of high monastic walls.

As they passed up the winding ascent, an old peasant, sitting watching for the boat under the orange-boughs, a nut-brown, withered Capriote woman, of full seventy years, started from the shadow in Idalia's path, and fell on her knees before her, pouring out on her gratitude and benedictions. Idalia stooped and raised her:

"Do not kneel to me, old friend. You owe me nothing."

"I owe you my children's life, my children's souls!" cried the Italian, in the patois of the bay,

lifting her brown stern face all bathed in tears. "To whom should I kneel, if not to you? Day and night I prayed to S. Theresa to save them, and she never heard my words; *you* heard them. The saints in glory never had more fairness than your face, 'llustrissima;—they never had the pity of your heart, the charity of your hand. They let us pray on, pray on, and never speak; you heard and saved us."

The one she blessed raised her once more, with a gentle veneration for age in the action.

"You have thanked me too much, *madre mia;* far too much. The little any one of us can do to relieve sorrow is but such slight payment of so great a human debt. When Fanciulla is old enough to marry, tell her I will give her her silver wreath and her dower. No! no more thanks—you shame me! You, who have led so long a life of goodness, to bless *me!*"

She stooped lower still towards the old peasant, to drop some gold into her kerchief unperceived, and passed on, while the praises and prayers of the Capriote were poured out, with tears staining weather-beaten, age-worn cheeks that in youth had never known so sweet a rain of joy and peace.

"Ah!" murmured Erceldoune to her, "you can-

not ask me *now* to believe you, when you say 'Non Angelus!'"

She turned her eyes on him with a sudden weary wistfulness, a sudden ironic scorn intricately commingled:

"I *do* say it. Repeat it till you believe it; it is a terrible truth. Here and there we do a little good;—save, as I saved to that poor Capriote, the life of starving infants, a legacy of grandchildren that her dead son left to drag her into the grave; children as bright as the morning, dying for want of the bread we throw away as we eat guinea peaches and two thousand-franc pine-apples!—what is the worth of it? It is a grain against a mountain—of evil!"

He looked at her with appealing pain; he felt vaguely that she, who to him was stainless as the morning, had the darkness of some remorse upon her, and yet he could neither follow the veiled intricacies of her nature, nor divest her of that divinity with which to-day yet more than ever he had clothed her. She glanced up at him and laughed.

"Do not look so grave! I never murdered any one in poisoned wines, or medicated roses; it is a good deal to say in these days of artistic slaughter! Believe me—a woman. If you rightly understand all those words say, you will never attribute me too

much divinity, or ask me to oblige you with consistency. Mephistopheles always takes a woman's guise now; he has found he can change his masks so much more quickly! Will you dine with me? Dress? Oh! I will pardon your costume—it is velvet, picturesque, rather Spanish."

She motioned him to take his way into the deserted library, and went from him down the corridors of the Villa Santilla, that they had reached whilst she spoke.

Had she any love for him? He had no belief that she could have. And yet—if there were none in her heart, was it not rankest cruelty to toy with him thus? No—he could not reproach her that it was; she had bidden him over and over again leave her, she had refused to hear words of love from him, she had only acceded to his remaining near her at his own persisting prayer; there was no blame here. He had no thought that she could care in any way for his fate; the caprice of her manner, the mockery of her satire, the profound pathos that had tinged her words, the strenuous force with which she had bidden him think evil of her—these were not the ways of women to one they loved; they were the inconstancies of a heart ill at ease, of a spirit without rest and not without regret, but they were not

the ways of a woman who loved. And yet an agony of passion was on him; he only felt, lived, thought, breathed, for her; and the purity of the sea-temple in which he had looked upon her face in the past day shed on her its own sanctity, its own exaltation. Nothing loftier, purer, more superb, ever rose in a poet's vision of idealised love than he had incarnated in his worship of her—worship whose grandest element was faith sublime in its very blindness.

At her villa that night there were a score of guests; all men, and all unknown to him; amongst them the Italian, Carlo of Viana, whose subjugation to her sway had been so proud a triumph. Men of the world though they might be, there was not one of them, not even the brave, bright, cordial southern Prince, who could wholly conceal the surprise and the dislike, almost the offence, with which they saw a stranger; their glances ranged over him curiously in a jealous challenge, and he felt as little amity to them.

"Count Phaulcon is not here?" asked the Prince of Viana of her.

"No. I regret to have to make his apologies; he is unhappily prevented the honour of meeting your Highness," she answered him, as they passed into the dining-chamber.

"And this foreigner; has he your pass, madame?" asked Viana, softly bending his head.

"He is not one of *us*, but he is my friend."

"Your friend, madame!" said Viana, with a certain smile that Erceldoune caught, and for which, though he could hear no words accompanying it, he could have tossed the Tuscan prince into the sea sounding below the cliffs. "A fair title, truly: but one with which none, I think, ever rest content!"

Viana said no more on the subject, but Erceldoune saw that, as in Turkey, so also in this larger gathering, his presence was unwelcome, and imposed a restraint on her guests, though not apparently on her. He was a curb put on them, and they bore it with chafing impatience, deepened in many of them by a jealous, surprised intolerance of this foreigner, with whom their hostess had entered the salons.

He himself sat in almost unbroken silence, eating little, drinking unconsciously much more than his wont. His thoughts whirled; he felt a fierce, reasonless hatred for all the men by whom he was surrounded. He saw her, through the haze of light and perfume and wine-odours and incense; he felt giddy, maddened, reckless; the fiercest jealousy was at riot in him, and the spiritual beauty of the earlier

day was gone for the while from him, as it was gone from her.

He saw her now as she was in all the varied scenes of her dazzling and careless world. She took little heed of him, rarely addressed him, rarely looked at him; her silver wit, barbed and ironic, scathed all it touched; her delicate laughter rang its mocking chime at things human and divine; the diamonds on the rose hues and black laces of her costly dress glittered like the dews on a pomegranate. Her resistless coquetries enslaved whomever she would, and cast their golden net now on one and now on another; the heartlessness of a heartless code, the caprices of a world-wise imperious woman, used to be adored, and to tread the adoration at fancy beneath her foot, the recklessness of one accustomed to defy the world, and to stake great stakes on fortune, ruling her as utterly as a few hours before in the Grotto Azzuro high thoughts and noble regrets had reigned in her.

Which was truly herself of those characters so dissimilar? It would have been hard to tell. He would best have comprehended her who had judged—both. But to the man who loved her, let her be what she should, let her treat him as she would, the Protean changes in her tortured him as

with so many masks that shrouded her beauty from him; the frank singleness of his nature was without key to the intricate complexity of hers. Had he seen her first and solely as she was to-night,—lying back in her chair, toying with her exotics glowing with rose and purple, touching the golden Lebanon wine or the luscious Lachryma, letting her eyes dwell with their lustrous languor now on one, now on another, and holding all those about her with a silver chain, surer than steel in its hold on them, ductile to her hand as silk,—he would have dreaded her power, he would have doubted her mercy, he would perhaps never have loved her.

Erceldoune listened to the words around him, but insensibly and uncertainly; his thoughts were on her alone; but when they reached his senses he heard the most advanced opinions of Europe, with the politics of the extreme Left, form the staple of all deeper discussion, and the basis of a thousand intricate intrigues and abortive projects that were circulated, often to be passed current with the seal of Idalia's approbation, much more often to be broken in two by some hint of later intelligence than theirs, or some satirically suggested comment languidly let fall by her on their excited warmth, like the fall of an icy spray. And yet there were

moments when she was not thus, when she was more seductive in her eloquent expositions, her sudden and then impassioned earnestness, than in her nonchalance; moments when she spoke low, swiftly, brilliantly, with a picturesque oratory, persuasive, vivid, irresistible, till her guests' bold eyes glowed with admiration as they listened, and they were ready to lend themselves to her hands, to be moulded like wax at her will, without a will of their own. Then, as often, when she had roused them or wooed them to the height of the enthusiasm. the rashness, or the sacrifice she had sought to win from them, she dropped the topic as suddenly, with a languid indifference or a sarcastic jest, sinking back among her cushions, playing half wearily with the scarlet blossoms of her bouquet or the velvet ears of the hound, with hardly a sign that she remembered the presence of her numerous comrades.

Varied and glittering though the conversation that went on round him was, infectious and free as its gaiety of tone was also, marked as might seem her confidence in him to introduce him there, and intoxicating to every sense as the entertainment to which she had brought him might be, Erceldoune was wretched in it; he could comprehend nothing; he was jealous of every man at her table; everything

he heard related to a party, but to which he referred, however indefinitely, his seizure in Moldavia. She scarcely looked at, rarely addressed him; in nothing, save her personal loveliness, could he recognise the woman with whom he had floated through the azure air of her sea-temple before the sun had set.

It was late when they rose from the table; cards were begun, while the windows stood open to the midnight, where the southern moon flooded the Mediterranean. Idalia threw herself into the hazard with the eagerness of a gamester; she played with the utmost recklessness, a hectic excitement shone in her eyes, the insouciant defiance of her wit rose with the risks of chance; she staked heavy sums, lost them, and only played the more eagerly still. Impair her charm even this insatiate passion could not do, distasteful though it be in women, and even abhorrent in women who are in their youth; as seductive she was, but there were danger, levity, heartlessness in the charm. She was now at her worst.

Once she glanced at the solitary form of Erceldoune standing out against the flood of moonlight; his face was pale and very grave, while his eyes had a pathetic wonder, rebuke, and pain in them;—she never looked at him again. The hours went on,

and the play with them; only broken by intervals when hookahs and cool drinks were brought round, and the homage offered to hazard was offered to its beautiful empress. She lost very considerably for a while, but the more she lost the more extravagantly she staked upon the cards; and fortune changed, pouring in on her its successes at length as lavishly as it had previously squandered her gold. So the short sweet night passed away, over the scattered hamlets that crowned the piles of rocks or nestled in sea-grey olive-woods;—passed away in the whirl of gambling, and the bitterness of jealous heart-burning, and the stir of restless passions. Without, where the waters lapped the shore so softly, and the islands hung in the starlit air like sea-birds' nests brooding above the waves, the aged, dying peacefully, dreamt of immortality, and children slept with smiles upon their lips under the low brown eaves of cabin roofs, and the eyes of poets, wakeful and laden with voluptuous thoughts, dwelt, never weary, on the silent sailing clouds, warm with the flush of earliest dawn; but here, within, there was but the fever of unworthy things.

Erceldoune, where he stood apart, glanced once or twice at that fair tranquil neglected night with

an impatient sigh, as though to take relief from its balmy freshness and cool serenity amidst the glittering martyrdom of the scene before him and the tumult of passion at work in him.

In the intensity of his pain he could have believed himself like the men in the old legends whom a sorceress bewitched; it was anguish alike to stay or to go; every moment he spent there was suffering as intense as when he had lain prostrate with the vultures wheeling above his eyes in the sickly light of the sun, yet he could not tear himself from its terrible fascination any more than he could then have torn himself from the power of the carrion birds. He believed in her; yes, not less utterly than when a few hours before he had heard her lofty and spiritualised thoughts unfold all diviner things, and lead him through the dim and glorious mysteries of a poet's speculations of eternal worlds. But he felt like a man in delirium tremens, who struggles with a thousand hideous and revolting shapes, that rise again as fast as he overthrows them. The atmosphere about her, the glances that dwelt on her, the profane mocking wit that woke her laughter, the eyes that met her own in such bold language, the gaming-passion that, while it possessed at least enslaved her, all these were so much desecration and

profanation to his idol, so much blasphemy against the woman who had been with him in the pure stillness of the Grotto Azzuro.

The sun above the eastward circle of the bay rose, breaking over the sea, while the stars were still seen through its golden haze, in which they would, with another moment, die. Idalia looked at the sun, then left the gaming-table.

"There is the day rebuking us. Good-night!"

As she spoke she paused one moment, the full fresh light of the broken morning falling upon her, while around was still the wax-glare of the chandeliers; the pure light lay before her, the impure glitter was behind.

She paused one moment, looking seaward, then turned negligently to her guests and dismissed them, with much carelessness, little ceremonial.

Viana pursued her with eager whispered words; she put him aside with a coquette's amusement and a graceful gesture of denial, and passed out, while the Nubian appeared and followed her.

The Prince, with stormy petulant anger on his face, left the room with his equerry. The others went out one by one.

Erceldoune remained silent and motionless, he neither saw nor heard what passed before him; he

had bowed his farewell instinctively, but all that he knew were the smiles he had seen cast on others, and the bold look with which Viana had followed her, and for which he could have struck him down as men of his race struck their foes when a back-handed sweep of a heavy iron gauntlet dashed down all rivalry, and washed out all insult. Each of her guests, as they passed out, cast a look of suppressed and envious dislike at him where he stood, as though he had a right to remain thus behind them. He noticed nothing, was conscious of nothing; an intolerable agony, a burning, boundless jealousy alone were on him. He stood there like a man stunned, looking blankly out at the sunlit sweep of waters. Evil passions were not natural to him; but the life he had led had left the free untameable strength of the old Border Chiefs unaltered in him.

He stood there with no remembrance of how little right he had to remain, scarcely any remembrance even of where he was. All at once he started and turned. As a dog feels, long before human eyes can see or human ears can hear it, the approaching presence that he loves, so he felt hers before she was near him; through the inner chambers, dark in twilight, where the lights were

extinguished and the dawn could ill penetrate, Idalia returned. Her step was weary, and her face, as the illumination from the chandelier, still burning in the window where he stood, fell on it, was pale, even to the lips on which, as some poet has it, "a sigh seemed set"—unuttered.

"You have remained after the rest!—how is that? It is as well, though, as it is. I wish to speak to you—alone."

The words themselves might have fed many a wild hope, many a vain thought, in any man less single-hearted and less incapable of misconstruing her meaning than he was. With him all the light died out from his face as he heard: he knew that if she would have listened to his passion she would not have returned to him now—she would not have addressed him thus.

He bowed gravely, and stood waiting for her pleasure. The forbearance was not lost on her. Idalia, more than any other woman, could appreciate this deference which gave her untainted comprehension, this delicacy which took no advantage of her return to him in solitude. She moved on towards one of the windows, and stood there, between the grey light of the rising day and the radiance of her own card-room.

"You have offered me many pledges of your service," she said, gravely, "nor do I doubt their sincerity. I am now about to test it; not on any ground that, as you think, my past slight aid to you gives me any claim upon your life—I have none whatever—but rather simply because I trust you as a gallant gentleman, as a chivalrous nature, as a true-hearted friend."

He bent his head in silence; he offered her no protestation of his faith: he knew that none was needed.

"I am about to ask you much," she resumed. "To ask you to undertake a service of some danger, of immediate action, and of imperative secresy; it may involve you in some peril, and it can bring you no reward. Knowing this, are you prepared to listen to it?"

His face grew a shade paler beneath its warm sea-bronze. He divined well what her meaning was in those few words, "it can bring you no reward." But he answered without a second's hesitation.

"Do with me what you will," he said, simply; "I am ready."

There were no asseverations, no eager vows, no ornate eloquence; but she knew better than they

could tell her that he was hers, to send out to life or to death at her choice.

She put out her hand to him with royal grace to thank him as sovereigns thank their subjects. She let his lips linger on it mutely, then, with no more emotion than queens show at that act of homage, she sank into a couch, and bent slightly forward.

"Listen! I want no political controversy, but it seems to me unutterably strange that you, with your bold high spirit, your passion for liberty, your grand contempt for conventionalities and station, should have no sympathy with a party whose cause is essentially that of freedom."

He looked at her wearily. What were creeds and causes to him now?

"I am no politician," he said, briefly. "I have never mingled in those matters. I am neither a student nor a statesman. I hate tyranny. I would stamp it out wherever I saw it; but the codes of my race were always conservative. I may unconsciously have imbibed them."

She smiled with ironic disdain. He had touched the qualities in her with which she could rule men like children, and could have swayed a kingdom with the sceptre of Russian Catherine or of Maria Theresa.

"'Conservative'! To reverence the divinity of rust and of corruption—to rivet afresh the chains of tradition and of superstition—to bind the free limbs of living men in the fetters of the past—to turn blind eyes from the light, and deny to thirsty lips the waters of truth—to say to the crowned fool, 'You are God's elect,' and to the poor, 'You are beasts of burden, only not, like other beasts, worthy shelter or fodder'—to cling to falsehood, and to loathe reason;—this is what it is to be 'Conservative'! Do you, who love freedom like any son of the desert, subscribe to such a creed as that?"

Now he saw her as those saw her who were subdued to her will, till no sense was left them save to think as she thought, and to do as she bade. The magic of the voice, the charm of the eloquence, the spell of the fearless truths, uttered with an imperial command, wrought on him as they had always done on others—as they could not fail to do on any man with a heart to thrill and a soul to be moved.

"I will believe what you believe!" he cried, passionately. "*You* are my creed; I have forgotten all others."

The brilliant fire which had been upon her face as she spoke, faded.

"Too many have made me their creed;—do you take some surer light to guide you. I do not seek a convert in you. You are happier, perhaps, if you can live thinking of none of these things. What I seek of you now is your service, not your adhesion. I want little else except your high courage; and I know that will never fail either you or others."

"Try it as you will."

There was a curious conflict of feelings in him as he heard her. He was moved to strong pleasure by the mere thought that she placed confidence, of whatever sort, in him, and he knew by her words that she held his honour, his faith, and his courage in full esteem; yet as strong a pain smote him heavily. He felt that these great purposes of her life, vaguely as he could imagine them, were dearer to Idalia than any individual love could become, and he felt also that in her manner to him which seemed to place him farther off from her than he had ever been.

She bowed her head in thanks to him.

"What I need is told in few phrases," she resumed. "The Conservative faction, that you favour, is in the full exercise of its iniquity in Naples—for a little while longer; a very little. There are to-night in my house—concealed here, I

do not shirk the word—two of its greatest victims, an old man and a young, father and son. The elder is as noble a patriot and scholar as Boethius, with no other crime than his;—he wishes the freedom of his Italy. King Francis plays the part of Theodoric. Once arrested, the fate of Boethius will be his. Less severity, perhaps, but the galleys, at best, awaits his only son, fresh from the campaigns of Sicily. By intelligence I have of the government's intentions, I know they will not be safe here three hours longer. I left my own yacht at Trieste; besides, it could not approach Naples without being searched, or probably brought-to by a broadside. Yours is here; will you save these men, take them secretly on board, and land them on the coast of Southern France? I give you my word that they have no other sin than one that is the darkest, perhaps, in the world's sight—to love truth and liberty too dangerously well;—how much they have suffered for these you will know when I tell you that they are Paolo and Cesario Fiesole."

An eager light flashed into his eyes, a noble indignation flushed his face; he knew the names well—the names of men who, for the choicest virtues of the patriot's and thinker's and soldier's characters, had endured the worst persecutions of the Neapo

litan Bourbons. Whatever he thought of creeds and causes, he loathed tyranny and oppression with all his heart and soul.

"Save them? Yes, if I lose my own life to do it."

She looked at him with a smile; how often she had seen that lion spirit, that eagle daring, lighten in temperaments the most diverse at her bidding!

"Ah! I thought your sympathies must always rise with liberty, and your hatred with oppression, or you would have belied your whole nature. I would make you 'with us' in an hour's reasoning."

His eyes met hers with something pathetic in their wistful gaze—as though they besought her not to trifle with him.

"You never need to reason with *me*. You have only to say, 'I will it.'"

An absolute obedience this, an utter unquestioning submission, prostrate as any that ever laid Marc Antony at Cleopatra's mercy, or Héloise at Abélard's; yet he did not lose his dignity in it; it was lofty even while it was subject. It touched her, yet it pained her; it brought home to her the intensity and truth of this man's devotion; she would not, or could not, return it or repay it; she had no right, she bethought her, with a pang, to use it as she

had used it with so many, to the furtherance of her own aims, however generous or just those aims might in this instance be. Moreover, she had come to say other and more bitter things to him than this.

She was silent a moment, looking at him where his gallant height rose against the clear subdued light of the breaking day; her future task was more painful than she, consummate mistress of every toil and art, and used to control every mood and every passion of men, had ever known one yet to be.

"Weigh the peril well," she said, after a pause, with something of restraint upon her. "It must be great—I mean, if you are discovered. Discovery may be guarded against, but it cannot be positively averted at all channels. If you will risk the danger of detection, your yacht can weigh anchor at once. She is, of course, in readiness? The Fiesoli, father and son, disguised as Capriote fishermen, can row you to the vessel amongst others. They are ready to take the alarm at any instant, and sleep dressed in their disguises. They will probably pass in safety; the Marinari here are dull and unsuspicious, nor would they harm what I shelter for a thousand ducats each. But, should detection occur, re-

member, the Bourbon government will not spare you even for your country's sake. You will have rendered yourself liable to the law for assisting the escape of condemned 'conspirators' and 'insurgents,' as the Court terms them, and you will share the fate they suffer."

The words were almost cold, but uttered with a visible effort; in the instant, even though the urgency of peril for those she sought to save, and the motive for which she bade him expose himself to this risk at her command, excused it to her, she loathed herself for sending him out to chance the slightest danger in fealty to a love that would never bring him anything except its pain. Indeed, his life was dearer to her than she, disdainful of all such weakness, yet would know.

He raised himself erect.

"I have given you my word; I am not used to weigh the hazards of any dangers that may accrue to me through keeping it."

She answered him nothing; the implicit obedience this man was ready to render her, even to the rendering up of his life or liberty at her word, moved her the more deeply beside the bold honour and the fearless independence of his carriage towards men, such as now flashed out even to her in his

reply. Once again unseen by him as she leaned her brow upon her hand, there came upon her face the warmth, and in her eyes the look, with which she had gazed upon him in the previous night. It passed; she rose and stood again in the shadow of the myrtle-covered casement, looking from him out towards the sea.

"When will you be ready, then?"

"I am so now. Your friends can row me on board when you will, and the yacht can weigh anchor with them at once."

"And you take no more thought than that of perilling your life for strangers?"

"I have never taken much thought for my life that I can recollect. Besides, what need is there of thought? You wish it."

He spoke only in the singleness of his fidelity, in the earnestness of his devotion to her; but the most refined subtilty of art and purpose could not have taught him a better means to win his way towards the tenderness of Idalia's nature, and an infinite tenderness there was, let her lovers and her foes say what they would.

Her cheek lost the warmth it had regained, her face had the same sadness on it which it had worn as she had entered the chamber, the intense melan-

choly which now and then fell on her at rare intervals gathered in her eyes. She pitied him, she honoured him; she would willingly, at all cost to herself, have effaced every thought which bound him to her, and saved him from every pang that came to him through her; but she was too proud and too world-worn to recognise that there might be a feeling even beyond this in her heart for him. Even had she recognised it, it would not have changed her purpose—the purpose which had made her let him see her as he had done through the past evening—the purpose to toy with him no more, but to put from him, now and for ever, the vainness of hopes which could but fatally beguile, only to as fatally betray, him.

She could do this as no other woman could have done; she had dealt with men in all the force of their enmities, all the height of their follies, in their most dangerous hours as in their most various moods; through paths no other of her sex could have approached, Idalia passed unhesitating and with impunity, and one of the secrets of her great power lay in her perfect and unerring knowledge of human nature. With the first hour in which she had seen the man who now stood with her, she had known his character as profoundly as she knew it

now. She turned to him, and spoke softly, yet with a certain grave and haughty grace.

"I do not pretend to misunderstand you; to do so would be but to imitate the mock humility of foolish women. You would do this thing for my sake; if done at all, it must be done for the pure sake of justice and compassion, not for mine. You gave me your promise that no other words like these should pass between us, and I told you if it were broken we could meet no longer."

He looked at her bewildered; she seemed to him to toy with him most recklessly, it was a deadly trial to his faith not to believe most mercilessly also.

"That promise I must break, then. It is the only one broken in my life. My God! why do you play with me so? You *know* what my love is!"

His voice sank to a breathless fervour; he stooped forward, his lips trembling, his eyes seeking hers with an anguish of entreaty. That look almost broke down her resolve; it was so easy to soothe this man's loyal heart with a smile, with a glance; it was so hard to put an end for ever to that imploring prayer. Hard to her at least, now, when for the first time some portion of the heavy blow she had so often dealt fell on her, some scorch of the fiery pain

she had so often caused touched herself, if it were but by sympathy and pity. Yet she was unmoved from her resolve; she was unflinching in a course once chosen, and she was resolute to fool him on no more with empty hope, to let him blind himself no longer. She wished to save him, as far as she could still effect this, from herself, and to do so she sacrificed his faith in her with a ruthless and unsparing hand.

"I do know it," she answered him; and her voice had no tremor in it, her face no warmth, her eyes dwelt on him with a melancholy in which no softer or weaker consciousness mingled. "And because I know it, and know its strength and its nobility, I will not dupe it or dupe you. What avail to lead you on after a mirage, to let you cheat yourself with fond delusions? Better you should know the truth at once—that what you feel for me can only bring you pain; strive against it for your manhood's sake."

He staggered slightly, and bent his head, like a man who receives a sudden sickening blow; despite the revulsion of the last few hours, it fell on him with the greater shock after the peace and beauty of the day they had passed together on the sea.

She looked at him, and a shadow of his own suffering fell on her; she could not strike him thus without herself being wounded—without a pang in her own heart. Yet what she had determined to do as she saw him standing aloof that night with the rack of wondering grief, of incredulous reproach upon his face, she carried out now, cost her in its loss—even to her fair fame—whatever it should.

She turned to him with a sudden impulsiveness most rare with her, and in her eyes something of the defiance with which she had fronted Conrad Phaulcon mingled with an infinitely softer and more mournful thing.

"Listen! As you have seen me to-night, *I am.* That higher, holier light you view me through is in your own eyes, not in me. Ask those whom you saw with me; they will tell you I am without mercy—believe them. They will tell you I have ruined many lives, blessed none—believe them. They will tell you you had better have died in the Carpathian woods than have fallen beneath my influence—believe them. Take the worst that you can learn, and credit it to its uttermost. Tell yourself till you score its truth into your heart, that I have never been, that I shall never be, such as you imagine me. Your love can be nothing to me; but I would save

it from its worst bitterness by changing it into hate. I would not even forbid *you* to change it into scorn."

Her eyes were prouder than they had ever been as she thus bade the man, who had centred in her his purest and most exalted faith, give to her the shame of his disdain. As she spoke, with her resistless beauty touched to a yet nobler dignity as she uttered this attainder against her own life, he must have loved her less, or have believed evil swifter than the one who heard her now, who could have followed out her bidding, and stamped the warning down into his soul, till all love of her was dead.

He looked at her in silence, and in the heart-stricken pathos of that look she saw how utterly she laid life desolate for him—she felt the recoil of the living death she dealt, as now and then the hunter feels it when he meets the upward dying gaze of the stag his shot has pierced.

In that instant, while his faith was beaten down for the first moment under the scourges of her words, and the chivalrous idolatry he bore her was bent and blinded under the dead weight of her own self-accusation, the baser alloy of passion alone was on him—he was only conscious of that madness in

which men are ready, as to yield themselves to an eternity of shame and torture,

"So that this woman may be mine!"

She saw that in him; she knew its force, its meaning; she knew that in this instant of his anguish her loveliness was all he felt or sought.

"No matter what you are," he muttered, breathlessly, "no matter what you bring me—I love you, O God! as no man ever, I think, loved before. Have you no pity on *that?* Be what you will, if—if——"

His voice sank, leaving the words unfinished; he felt powerless to plead with her; he felt hopeless to touch, or sway, or implore her; and also, beyond all, he could not even, on the acceptance of her own testimony, dethrone her from his stainless faith, any more than a man can at a word tear out from him as worthless a religion that he has cherished as divine through a long lifetime.

The darkest passions had no terror for her; she had known them over and over again at their worst, and had ruled them and ruled by them. But deepest pity was in her heart for him; she sought to save him, even at all sacrifice to herself, and she saw that it was too late; she knew, as his eyes

burned down into hers, that, though they should part now and for ever, this longing she had wakened would consume him to his grave.

A woman weaker and more pliant would have yielded to that impulse, and have given him tenderness: to the pride and to the truth of Idalia's nature to have stooped so far had not been possible.

"Love is no word for me," she said, with calmness, underneath which a vibration of deeper feeling ran. "I am weary of it; and I have none to give. I have played with it, bribed with it, ruled by it, bought by it, worked on it, and worked through it—evilly. I cannot do that with you. I must give you suffering, I will not also give you danger. Take your promise back; I absolve you from it."

Her eyes were turned towards the sea, and not to him, as she spoke; she could not watch the misery she dealt. She knew as though she saw it the look that came upon his face—darker and deadlier than the physical anguish that had been upon it when she had found him dying in the Carpathian pass. She had stricken him strengthless; she had refused his love; she had refused even his belief in her, even his homage to her; she had condemned herself for the evil that she wrought, and she stood aloof from him, imperial, world-weary, rich in the world's

wealth, without a rival in the sovereignty of her beauty and her will. Rich himself in those accidents of power and possession which she owned, he might have pleaded still, on the ground of his wretchedness, against her fiat; but in the pride of his beggared fortunes his lips were sealed to silence; he could not force his love, having no treasure upon earth save that to give, upon the empress of those brilliant revels on which the dawn had lately broken, upon the mistress of those high ambitions which seemed alone to reach her heart; upon a woman so proud, so peerless, so throned in every luxury and every splendour as this woman was. She was not haughtier in her magnificent command than he in his ruined poverty; and in that moment he had not force, nor memory, nor consciousness left to him. He only suffered dumbly and blindly, like a dog struck cruelly by the hand he loves, the hand he would have died in striving to obey.

She looked at him once—only once—and a quick sigh ran through her. Had she saved him from the fangs of the carrion beasts and the talons of the mountain birds, merely to deal him this? Better, she thought, have left him to his fate, to perish in a nameless grave, under the etèrnal shelter of the watching pines! Yet she did not yield. Without

a glance or sign she moved slowly away across the chamber;—their interview was over, its work was done.

His step arrested her: he moved forward with a faint slow effort, like one who staggers from the weakness of long illness.

"Send those you spoke of to me; I do not take my promise back."

She turned her eyes full on him with a sudden light of wonder, of admiration, of amaze.

"You would do that—*now?*"

"I have said—I will."

She looked at him one lingering moment longer; all that was great, and high, and fearless in her nature answering the royalty in his; then she bent her head silently.

"I thank you. Be it so."

And with those words only, she left him.

CHAPTER VI.

"THE LIGHT IN THE DUST LIES DEAD."

IN a distant apartment of the villa a youth lay sleeping, his richly-tinted face with the black curls falling back from the bold brow, like one of the beautiful boys who loved, and laughed, and danced, and sung in one long carnival, from sunset to sunrise, in the glad Venice of Goldoni. He slept soundly, as only youth sleeps, dressed in a Capriote fishing suit; and on his chest, as the striped shirt fell back from it, there were the scars of deep wounds just healed — no more — over the strong fearless beatings of his young heart. A little distance from him sat his father, an old man, with the grand head of a noble of Tintoretto's or Bassano's canvas—the head of the great mediæval signori who filled the porphyry palaces, and swept through the Piazzo San Marco, in the red gold of glowing summer evenings, when the year of revel was held in Venice for the Foscari's accession, and the City of the Waters was in her

glorious reign. The elder man was not sleeping; his eyes were on his son. He had lost three such as that sleeping boy for Italy—three trampled down under the tread of Austrian armies or of Pontifical mercenaries; the one left was the last of his name. But he would have sent out a hundred more, had he had them, to bring back the dead grandeur to Rome, to see the ancient liberties revive, and the banner of the free republic float in spring-tide air above the fresh lagoons and over the green-wreathed arches of his beloved Venezia.

They had suffered much, both of them, for liberty; but they were both willing to suffer more—the boy in the dawn of his manhood, and the elder in the weariness of his age. There was no sound in the chamber; food and wine stood near; the shutters were closed; through a small oval aperture the glowing sun in the hour of its sunrise alone penetrated, flooding the floor with seven-coloured light. From the dawn without there came a faint delicious odour of carnations, of late violets, of innumerable leaves. The door opened noiselessly; through it came Idalia. The old man started and rose, took her hand and pressed it to his lips, then stood in silence. She glanced at the sleeping youth, lying

there in so profound a rest with a smile on his arched full lips.

"Poor boy!" she said, softly; "it is a cruelty to waken him. Dreams are the mercies of life. Yet there is no time to be lost. You may be saved still."

"What! your friend will serve us so well as that?" asked the Italian, wonderingly, "But it is not strange; the English are a bold people, they never refuse to resist oppression."

Over Idalia's face swept an unspoken contempt.

"The individual English, no!—but the nation would let any freedom be strangled like a hanged dog, rather than risk its trade or lose a farthing."

"But it is a great risk for him. We have no right to expose him to it."

"No; we have no right," she answered, almost bitterly. "Not a shadow of right!—still he accepts it: he does not heed peril. What brave man does?"

"For you."

The words were softly added; the old Venetian looked at her with a mournful fixity, an unuttered interrogation. She turned slightly from his gaze; she knew what was in his thoughts; she knew that he reminded her of the many who had gone out to peril, and fallen beneath it, for her sake.

"We can waste no time, caro amico," she said, rapidly, in his own liquid, caressing Venetian tongue. "The earlier you leave, the less likelihood of detection. He will wait for you on the shore; you will row him to his vessel amongst others; nothing can be simpler. You will be safe with him."

Something that was almost the weakness of tears rose in her eyes as she spoke; she thought how entirely her trust would be preserved, how surely, at risk of very life, he, whom she recompensed with cold words and bitter neglect, would redeem his promise.

Over the browned, stern, noble face of Filippo Fiesoli the warmth of his lost youth stole; a look came into his glance that only was not love because chastened by so utter a hopelessness, and purified from all touch of passion.

"Ah!" he murmured, in his snow-white beard, "I can give you nothing, save an exile's gratitude and the blessing of an old man near his grave. You noblest among women!—what you have risked for us!"

Idalia's eyes softened with a mellow wistful tenderness, with an unspeakable regret.

"Ah, Fiesoli! if all patriots were pure, all liberators true as you are, my best friend, I would count every loss my highest, holiest gain! But there is so

much dross amidst the little gold, there are such coward villanies masked under freedom's name. *I*, too, 'noblest amongst women!'—O God, sometimes I think myself the vilest."

He sighed; he knew her meaning; the grand pure heart of the old patriot would not take on itself the falsehood of flattering disguise.

"You are noblest in much," he said, softly; "something too pitiless, something too alluring, it may be, to the many who love you; but your errors are the errors of others, your nobility is your own."

She shook her head.

"Gentle sophisms and full of charity, but not true. My errors are my own, woven close in my nature and my mind; such nobility as you speak of —if I can claim it—comes rather from the recklessness of courage, the passion for liberty, the hatred of tyranny, than anything better in me. But I am not here to speak of myself; there is not an instant to be lost: wake Cesario, poor child, and then leave me. We are too used to life and partings to feel this sudden or strange; but, my dear friend, my honoured friend, peace be with you, if we never meet again."

She held out both her hands to him with a look on her face that her lovers had never seen there, so

gentle, so softened, so full of reverent sweetness. Filippo Fiesoli stooped over them in silence, pressing them in his own; he was an old man, very near his last years, as he had said, but perhaps in all the homage that had been lavished on her she had never had one heart more nobly and more purely hers than was that of the great age-worn patriot's. His voice was unsteady as his farewell was spoken.

"Death will take me, most likely, before I can ever look upon your face again; but my dying breath will be a prayer for you."

There was an infinite dignity, a sublime pathos, that were beyond all pity in the benediction; age had set its barrier of ice betwixt them, and the grave alone waited for him, but the love wherewith he loved her was very rare on earth.

Without another word he turned from her, and awoke his son. The young soldier sprang up alert and ready on the instant: he had often wakened thus with the Sicilian legions. As he saw Idalia, his beautiful Titian face flushed, his eyelids fell shyly as a girl's, he sank before her on one knee with the old grace of Venice, and touched the hem of her dress with his lips. She smiled at him, an

indulgent, gentle smile, such as she would have given a caressing animal.

"There is no time to spare in courtesies, Cesario. The moment is come. You are ready?"

The boy's lips trembled.

"A soldier is always ready, but—if you would rather let me die near you, than send me out to exile!"

She passed her hand lightly, half-rebukingly, over the silk of his dark curls.

"Foolish child! you talk idly. To stay here were to be locked in the dungeons of the Capuano. Go with your father, Cesario mio; your first duty is to him, your second to Italy and to liberty."

The youth's eyes gleamed with the fire of the south and the fire of the soldier—the fire that her words could light as flame lights the resinous pine-wood.

"My *first* is—to you."

She smiled on him; she knew the romantic adoration that he bore her would harm him little, might lead him far on noble roads.

"Scarcely!—but if you think so, then obey me, Cesario. Give your thought, beyond all, first to your father; give the life that remains through all trial and all temptation to Italy and to freedom."

The boy's earnest, impassioned gaze looked upward at her through a mist of tears.

"I will!" he murmured, fervently—"I will."

She drew her hand from him with a slight gesture of pain; she had seen that gaze from so many eyes, she had heard that vow taken by so many voices. Eyes that were sightless; voices now for ever stilled.

"Farewell," she said, gently, to both. "I will send my Albanian to you—he can be trusted; and you must go down alone to the shore. Give this to my friend, and he will know you. He will be in waiting."

She took from her hand one of her rings, a lapis-lazuli stone of ancient workmanship, and held it out to the elder Fiesoli; then, without longer pause, she passed from their presence. The boy Cesario flung himself down on the couch she had just risen from, and with his head bowed on his arms sobbed like a woman, he was a bold and gallant soldier, but he was but a youth; his father stood motionless, the morning sunlight, as it strayed through the oval in the casement, falling with a golden hue upon his grand bronzed brow and the white sweep of his patriarch's beard. Differently they both loved her, equally they alike knew their love hopeless.

Idalia passed on to her own apartments. These were not the first lives she had saved by many; at personal cost, personal peril; saved with courage, and daring, and fertile expedient; but they were as nothing to her in this moment beside the many more that through her had been lost. She had not yet slept or rested for a moment, but she felt no sense of fatigue, no willingness to sleep. Alone, the proud sapphire-crowned head of the coquette, the *lionne*, the sorceress, the brow that would have borne so royally the Byzantine diadem of her ancestral Comneni, drooped wearily, yet not from physical weariness; the flush upon her cheeks had faded, and her form, with its trailing rich-hued skirts, and jewels flashing in an eastern splendour, was in strange contrast with the melancholy of her attitude and of her thoughts as she stood there in solitude at last, with the dawning light of the young day shut out by draperies of falling silk, and a single Etruscan lamp only burning near.

"Now he has seen me as I am," she thought—"as I am!" A smile crossed her lips, but it was a smile more sad than tears;—there was in it so much hatred of herself. "It was but just to him. No cruelty from me would kill his love, but his own scorn may. *They* love me for my beauty, because I

charm their sight and their senses, because they are fools, and I know how to make them madmen! So that a woman were lovely, they would care not how vile she might be! But he—he has the old knightly faith, the old gallant honour; he gives his heart with his passion; he must revere what he adores. He has seen me as I am to-night; the pain was deadly to him; yet, if it rend me out of his memory, he may live to be grateful for it."

The warmth of the chamber seemed stifling to her, the perfumed oil of the lamp oppressive; the room itself, with its hangings, its cabinets, its decorations, its countless bagatelles of art and wealth, of extravagance and of effeminacy, struck on her loathsomely.

"Ah! how like my life!" she thought, with an impetuous scorn. "The pure day is shut out, and all that is heated, unreal, luxurious, meretricious, worthless, is chosen instead! A diamond-studded, gas-lit, dangerous lie, instead of the sunlight of truth!"

She pushed the heavy folds of a curtain back, and opened the casement beyond it; as the villa overhung the sea, so the window jutting out overhung the rock, and gave to view in one grand sweep the whole bow of the bay, with the white mists of

earliest day resting still midway between earth and heaven. Sound there was none, save close at hand the low music of a monaco's wing, and from afar the swinging cadence of a chiming angelus.

She stood silent, looking long outward through the fragrant coils of orange-blossom and of climbing ivy that hung in their green shadow before the oval of the window, towards the waking world that smiled below. To her, whose heart had never beaten for one of those which had throbbed for her, there came at last some recoil of the suffering which she had so often dealt, some touch of that futile pain which for her and through her had been so often borne. She saw still, in memory, the wondering and grieved reproach of the eyes which had haunted her throughout all the past hours.

"Do I love!—*I!*" she thought, while a laugh half haughty, half ironic, and yet more mournful than either, came on her lips. And she turned back again from the brightness of the day with a gesture of her old imperious disdain. She was too proud, too sceptical, too used to command, too unused to weakness, not to be loth to admit such yielding folly in her, not to be contemptuous of her own softer thoughts and tenderer impulses. Love!—to her it was a fool's paradise, a gay and

glittering masquerade, a sceptre with which to sway a court of madmen, a weapon with which to reap the harvests of gold and power, a passion that men got drunk with as with raki, and through which, as they pampered or inflamed it, women could indirectly rule the world. Her contempt for it had been as great as the sovereignty with which she had used it.

It was bitter to her to think that she could have so much weakness in her—so much living still beneath all that she had seen, known, done, to slay it by the roots. Something of the warmth of passion, something of its tenderness, were on her; and she flung them away, she would not have them. The unquestioning fealty which was ready to do her will at all and any cost, the devotion to her which, without any recompense, any hope, any self-interest, accepted the peril from which she had offered to free him, and with a simple grandeur claimed the right to be true to his word: these moved her as nothing else could have done. Tempests had swept over her, leaving her utterly unswayed by them; the rarity which touched her as something strange and unfamiliar was the unselfishness of the love he bore her. Many had loved her as well; none so generously.

She could see the shore far below—down through a wreathing, shimmering interspace of green leaves. She had rescued men at far keener, closer danger than there was in this. She had gone to Russian masked-balls, ignorant whether at any moment the hand of an Imperial officer might not be laid on her domino, and her fettered limbs be borne away without warning, through the frozen night, over leagues on leagues and steppes on steppes of snow, to the Siberian doom which awaits the defenders of Poland. She had swept at a wild gallop through the purple gloom of the midnight Campagna with her courage only rising the higher, her eyes only gleaming the darker. She had glided in her gondola through balmy spring sunsets, when all Venice was wreathed and perfumed with flowers in some Austrian *festa*, and had laughed, and coquetted, and stirred her fan, and listened languidly to the music, while hidden beneath her awning was one whom the casemates of the Quadrilateral would enclose only to let him issue to his death, unless her skill could save him. She had passed through many hours of supreme peril, personal and for others, and the disquietude had not been on her that was on her now.

She leaned there against the casement watching the beach beneath, where it stretched out along the

glittering sea. It was still only the daybreak, but the fisher-folk were astir, in different groups, spreading out their nets in the warmth of the rising sun, or putting out in their boats from the shore. There was glowing colour, picturesque movement, life, healthful, active, innocent, along the grey line of the sand; she sighed half impatiently as she watched it. Was it good to have no thought, save of a few fish?—no fear, save of the black swoop of the mistral?—no care in life, save for those striped sails, and those brown keels, and those sun-browned, half-naked children tumbling in the surf?

No; she did not so belie herself as to cheat her thoughts into the lie; she would not have relinquished the power, the genius, the vitality, the knowledge of her life, for a thousand years of the supreme passionless calm that looks out from the eyes of Egyptian statues, far less for the dull brute routine of peasant ignorance and common joys.

On the sands Erceldoune waited, leaning against a ledge of rock, with his eyes fixed absently on the waters. Even at the distance he was from her she could see the profound weariness that had altered his bold and soldier-like bearing, the hopeless melancholy that darkened his face as the light of the

dawn fell upon it. She was not a woman to wish things done undone, or to know the vacillations of regret; yet, in the moment, she almost wished the words unspoken which had been uttered by her in a sudden impulse and resolve to let him blind himself no longer.

"It is useless to try and save him now," she thought; "*he* will never forget."

There was something which touched her infinitely in that guard he kept there; patient as the Pompeian soldier standing at his post, while the dark cloud of the ashes and the liquid torrent of lava-flame poured down, certain as he that no reward could come to him for his unrecompensed obedience, save perhaps one—death.

The Venetians left her garden. She saw them approach, and address him; she saw him start as the elder man handed him the ring, and, as he took it, give one upward glance at the eyrie of the villa where she leaned. Then he signed to him the sailor whom he had first spoken with on the night of his arrival at Capri.

There was an instant's terrible suspense as the Capriote stood curiously eyeing these two unknown sailors, whose presence on his shore he felt to be odd and unwelcome, since living was poor in the

Picola Marina, and strangers likely to take a share of it were commonly roughly handled: then he gave good-humoured assent to whatever had been asked of him and launched his boat into the breakers with the single force of his broad breast and brawny arms. He motioned the unknown fishermen to take the oars, with somewhat of a sullen grace, as though their advent still annoyed him; he took the helm himself; Erceldoune flung his limbs down across the benches; the little skiff put out to sea. Thus far the work was done.

As the boat left the shore he turned, rose slightly, and looked back at Capri: that mute farewell, that speechless witness of how his promise had been redeemed, smote her keenly.

She watched the movement of the boat through the waves, with the daybreak light upon the stripes of its orange awning—watched it as it receded farther and farther, the tall figure of the Capriote standing at the stern, in his loose white shirt and his brown brigand-like Italian beauty—watched it till it swept out unarrested, unobserved, to where the yacht rocked at anchor.

The boat reached the vessel's side; a while longer, and the anchor weighed in the quiet of the dawn, whilst the only things that stirred on the whole

width of the bay were a few scattered fishing-craft. She, leaning there against the grey of the stone, looking out through the wreaths of the leaves, never left her watch, never relaxed her gaze. She knew the tigers who slept yonder where Naples lay; she knew the cannon that would boom out through the sunny air if the errand of the *Etoile* were dreamed of; she knew the dungeons that yawned in the Vicaria for those who fled. She could not tell how much, how little, of the escape that she had organised was known to the Bourbon court; she could not tell that the government of Francis might not be only seeming to slumber, that it might crouch like a jungle-beast the surer to seize. She could not tell, even though to no living being had a word been whispered of her intent; she could not tell, for walls have ears where tyranny rules and priestcraft listens.

Any moment while the anchor was slowly wound upward, and the rigging of the yacht covered with eager sailors, the alarm-gun might boom from Naples, and the pursuit run down the schooner, boarding and swamping her in the midst of the smiling seas of the tranquil dawn.

At last she moved; her white canvas filled with a fair wind, her helm was turned straight westward,

her ensign of St. George fluttered in the favouring breeze. With an easy gliding motion, like a swan's, she passed through the sun-lit waters, unnoticed, unpursued. Against her rails one figure leaned motionless; his eyes were turned towards the rock, hanging so far above, where the villa was suspended like a falcon's nest; turned there always whilst the yacht passed onward, out beyond Capri, beyond Ischia, beyond the range of Neapolitan guns and the pursuit of Neapolitan ships, outward to round the snow-peaks of the eyrie of the Buonaparte eaglets, and to steer on towards the southern coast of France, in safety.

As it receded, slowly, surely, till its sails looked no larger than the sea-gulls that flew past her, and the busy day of the young summer awoke all round the semicircle of the bay, then, only then, Idalia moved and left the ivy-sheltered casement. From the glittering stretch of the azure seas, as from the thoughts newly arisen in her, she turned, with a pang of pain, with a throe of regret, the bitterness of pride repelling weakness, the bitterness of pride warring with remorse.

CHAPTER VII.

"MORE GREAT IN MARTYRDOM THAN THRONED AS CÆSAR'S MATE."

AT the Prince of Viana's villa in the interior there was a masquerade; brilliant, gorgeous, like the splendid *feste* of mediæval Italy, of Venice in its Dandolo glory, when the galleys swept home with the rich Byzantine spoils; of Florence while Isabel Orsini was in her loveliness, and the Capello beamed her sunny fatal smile, and even grave Machiavel sauntered well amused through the festive Gardens of Delight, when the Embassies of the Ten came in their purple pomp, or the City of Flowers laughed through endless mirth and music. The fête was very magnificent at the palace at Antina, given by lavish princely hands that scattered their gold right and left, and vied with the Grammont and the Doria brilliance away yonder in old Rome. That at it other masks were worn than those black Venetian ones of pleasure, that beneath

the swell of the music words of menace and danger were exchanged, that the domino was only donned that the sword might be surely drawn hereafter, that under the dewy orange-boughs, and beside the starlit waters and on the marble stairs, and under the light exchange of frivolous wit, intrigues were woven and dark plans made perfect,—these no more disturbed the gaiety and the glory of the Antina masquerade than such had disturbed the laughing tide of festivities in Venice, or the garden fêtes of the Tuscans in the Cinque Cento. Rather they suited and enhanced it; it was in Italy, and they made it but the more Italian. It was the dagger of Sforza glancing beneath the Arlecchino spangles and colours of Goldoni. Whoso cannot understand this mingling—the laugh and the arlequinade as really joyous as the steel and the stroke are surely subtle—can never understand the Italy of the Past: perhaps not the Italy of the Present.

Around one the maskers gathered with pressing homage, around one the groups were more eager, more sedulous, more vivacious in their wit, more earnest in their under-current of political discussion than round any other; for on the elegance of the scarlet domino was the well-known badge of the Silver Ivy, that rallying symbol which brought to

her all the lovers and the vassals of Idalia. She reigned there, as she had reigned wherever her foot fell, since the day eight years before, when she had left the leafy shadows and the yellow corn-lands of Sparta to come out to this world of mystery, intrigue, romance, danger, and pleasure, which she had made so wholly her own.

It has been said, "Every woman is at heart a Bohemian." Idalia was one to the core, all proud and patrician though she was. The excitement and the peril of her life, with its vivid colour and its changing chances, she would not have exchanged for the eternal monotony of the most perfect calm; not even when she most utterly loathed, most utterly rebelled against the bondage which had entered in with the life she pursued. She was weary with herself often for the evil that she had done, she hated with an intense hatred the chains that had wound themselves round her freedom-loving, liberty-craving nature; but all the same, once plunged into the whirlpool of the dangers she directed, of the excitations she enjoyed, Idalia would not have laid them down and left them—left her sceptre and her peril—without a pang bitter as that which tears life out, without a lingering and unbearable regret. It is false philosophy to say that

those who have been once launched on a career which bears them now in the sunlight, now in the storm-shadow, now high on laughing waves of pleasure, now low sunk down under black bitter waters, varying ever, yet ever full of a tempestuous delight, of a headlong risk, of an abundant luxuriant glow and intensity of life, will ever willingly return to the dull flow of tideless and unchequered streams. They may in moments of exhaustion fancy that they would willingly take the patience and the monotony of serene unnoted lives —human nature will ever at times, be it in king or peasant, turn from what it has to sigh for what it has not;—but it is only a fancy, and a passing one; they would never for a second make it a reality.

Thus it was with Idalia now; remorse haunted her, captivity in a sense galled her with terrible fetters, often she hated herself and hated those around her; yet once in the vortex of the intrigues and the ambitions which had so long possessed her, she forgot all else. Thus she forgot all save them here at the Antina masquerade. It was not that she was changed, it was not that her other impulses were not vitally and deeply true; it was simply that the dominant side of her character now

came into play, and the love of power that was in her usurped its ancient sway.

Moreover here, though she scorned and abhorred many of the companions and tools that the cause necessitated and employed, the cause itself was a pure and lofty one; one for which her will could never slacken, her love never grow cold;—it was the freedom and the indivisibility of Italy.

This was in the hearts, often on the lips, of all those to-night at Antina; amidst the music, the laughter, the wit, the balmy air breathed over a million flowers, the melodies of nightingales' tender throats, the flash of fire-flies among the groves of myrtle; and in the endless reception-chambers, with their jasper and their onyx, their malachite and their porphyry, stretching onward till the eye was lost in the colonnades of pillars, in the flood of light, in the sea of colour. It was a scene from the Italy of the Renaissance, from the Italy of the Cinque Cento, from the Italy of Goldoni, of Boccaccio, of Tullia d'Arragona, of Bembo, of Borgia; —but beneath it ran a vein of thought, a stream of revolution, a throb of daring that gave it also a memory of Dantesque grandeur, of Gracchan aspirations, of Julian force: "One Italy for the Italians!" vibrated through it; an echo, tnough a

faint and distant one, of the ancient challenge, "The whole earth for the Romans."

Suddenly through the glittering gaiety of the masquerade, the magnificence of the princely banquet, the mirth of the Neapolitan revelries, an icy whisper ran; it was vague, unformed, it died half spoken upon every lip, yet it blanched the boldest blood; it was but one sickening, shameful, accursed word—"*betrayed.*"

The music ceased, the laughs hushed, there was a strange instantaneous pause in all the vivacious life, filling the palace and the gardens with its colour and its mirth; there was such a lull as comes over sea and land before the breaking of the storm. Men looked in each other's faces with a terrible dread responsive in each other's eyes; glance met glance in a mute inquiry; friend gazed at friend in a wild search for truth, a bitter breathless thought of unmeasured suspicion; there was a chill, black, deadly horror over all—none knew whom to trust. On the stillness that had succeeded the music, the laughter, and the festivity, sounded dully the iron tread of heavily armed men; where the golden fireflies glistened among the leaves, glistened instead the shine of steel; on the terraces and far down the gardens gleamed the blades of bayonets, the barrels

of musketry; the earth seemed in a moment to grow alive with swarming men, and bristling with levelled weapons; gendarmes filled the piazza and the courts; the soldiers of Francis were upon them. There was an instant's silence so intense that the murmur of the bubbling fountains alone reigned in it; then with a shock like thunder, the bold blood of the sons of liberty, growing desperate, threw them in headlong violence unarmed upon their foes. Little avail;—the solid line of steel was drawn around, with not an inch unfilled; they were hemmed in and caught in the toils.

Carlo of Viana, with his careless eyes alight like a lion's in its wrath, tore down from where it hung a keen Damascus sword, placed amidst a stand of curiously wrought and antique arms, and strode over the mosaic pavement to one of his guests, whose azure domino was broidered and fastened with wreaths of silver ivy.

His voice shook as he stooped to her ear.

"Madame—Idalia—this is more for you than us. Follow me at once; there is a secret passage that no living creature knows besides myself; I can save you—I *will* save you!"

"I thank you deeply. But—I shall not fly from them!"

"My God! Not fly? Do you not know that if you are taken——"

Her lips might be a shade whiter, but her voice had no hesitation as she answered him:

"My fate will not be worse than others; whatever is theirs, I share."

Carlo of Viana drew the broad blade with a ringing echo from the sheath:

"Mother of Christ, then, we will defend you while life is in us!"

At that very moment the storm broke, the tumult began; the gay maskers fled in from the terraces and gardens like sheep driven wild by a wolf-dog; the banqueters seized the antique weapons, the weighty candelabra, the bronzes, the toy daggers—all and anything that would crash through like iron or be hurled like stones; the double lines of steel drew closer, and filled in every aperture, blocked every door of egress; an officer advanced to the centre of the great arch that spanned the entrance of the first reception-room, and addressed the Prince himself:

"Eccellenza, in the King's name, I demand your unqualified submission, and your surrender to me of

all suspected persons—notably, first, of the notorious revolutionist known by the title of the Countess Vassalis."

For all answer, with a mighty oath that rang through all his banqueting-chambers, Viana lifted his arm, and whirled in a flashing arc above his head the bright blade of the Persian steel;—Idalia bent forward with a swift gesture, which caught his wrist, and arrested the sabre in its downward course; then, turning to the King's officer, she removed her Venetian mask, and looked at him calmly.

"If it will spare the shedding of innocent blood, you know me now."

For one moment there was a dead silence—the hush of speechless surprise, of speechless admiration; the emotion of a passionate love, of a passionate pride, in and for her filled the hearts of her own people with an agony of homage and of grief; the soldiers of the Bourbons were arrested for the instant, paralysed and confounded as they looked on her, fronting them with a proud serenity, a dauntless, tranquil contempt, with the light on her diamond-bound hair. Then, as the officer of the Palace troops advanced to arrest her, his soldiers drawn closer and firmer round the banqueting-hall,

the shouts of "Viva l'Italia!" "Viva la libertà!" shook the walls with the roll of thunder; a hundred who would have died at her feet to save a dog of hers from injury threw themselves round her as in a guard of honour; driven to bay, the lovers of freedom, the haters of tyranny, were ready to perish, shot down like hunted beasts, rather than ever yield. Carlo of Viana flung himself in the van, his sabre flashing above his head; the gay and splendid dresses of the maskers, glittering in the light, seemed to heave and toss like a sea of colour; they circled her like gardes du corps; their improvised weapons, torn from the tables, from the cabinets, from the walls, whirled in the radiance that burned from innumerable lamps. Idalia's eyes gleamed with such fire as might have been in the eyes of Artemisia when she bore her prow down on the Calyndian; of Antonina when she pierced the armies of the Goths, holding watch and ward to sack Imperial Rome; of Boadicea when she led the Iceni on to the fasces and the standards of the conquering legions. She would have given herself to save them; but since they, with or without her, must be doomed, her whole soul rose responsive to the challenge of danger, to the defiance of submission.

Her glance beamed on them with a superb light; sign of fear, thought of terror, there were none on her; she stood unmoved, the centre of that tossing ocean of colour, of steel, of floating dominoes, of levelled pistols, and glanced at Viana with a glance that thrilled him like flame and made him drunk like wine.

"Right! If they must take us, let us be dead first!"

As touchwood to the flash of fire, their blood and their wills answered her bidding; with a single sweep of his arm Viana felled down the commander who faced him, in a stroke that cleft straight through bone and brain; it was the signal of a life-and-death resistance. With a yell of fury, the soldiers closed in; a single voice from one unseen rose clear above the din.

"Reserve your fire, cut those carrion down like straw, and capture her alive!"

The voice was the voice of supreme command; officers and troops alike obeyed it; it was the mellow clarion tone of Giulio Villaflor, if the Priest of Peace could be the chief of such an errand. With bayonets fixed, in ranks three deep, pressing steadily through the courts and chambers, the soldiers of Francis came on to the band of the

maskers. Not a man wavered as the pointed file of steel pressed towards them: their masks flung aside, lest in that moment of supreme danger any should deem them guilty of the wish to hide beneath disguise, their right arms lifted, their brave faces set, the Revolutionists waited the approach of the Royalists—waited till there was scarce a foot's breadth between their circle and the naked blades levelled against them. Then, with a marvellous unison, as she raised her hand, they launched themselves forward, Viana in their van, and the weapons with which the haste of extremity had armed them fell with furious strength and lightning speed crash down on the ranks of the soldiers. Strange weapons—the embossed barrels of old Florentine arquebuses, the butt-ends of toy ivory pistols, the bronzed weight of lifted statuettes, the gold-handled knives of the banquet-tables, the massive metal of Cellini vases, the arabesqued steel of mediæval rapiers,—anything, everything that could have been torn down in the moment, from the art-treasures round, were hurled—as stones are hurled from a barricade,—down on the advancing troops of the king with mighty force, with tremendous issue. The Bourbon legionaries reeled and wavered under that pitiless storm, that fell like thunder-bolts upon

them; more than one swayed back stone dead as the bronze or gold missile of some statuary or amphora felled him to the ground. Forbidden to fire, they hesitated dismayed before that terrible band of revellers turned to warriors, of maskers changed to foemen, of idle laughing wits and dancers grown desperate as men who fought for more than life. The Royalists recoiled; they were chiefly the dross of various nations; they could not front the blazing glance, the tiger-swoop, the proud, passion-heated scorn, the fearless menace of Italian nobles and Italian patriots. From the gloom of the night without, the same clarion voice rolled, clear as a bell's, merciless as a Nero's.

"Cowards! perdition seize you. Advance and fire on them."

It was a strange battle-field;—the beautiful ball-room and banqueting-halls of Antina! It was a strange battle-scene!—the circle of the dominoes like a ring of many colours were belted round the form of Idalia like guards around their menaced queen; the dead men were lying with their blood slowly welling out over the rich mosaics and the velvet carpets; the soldiers of the Throne had halted in a broken line; the light that had been lit for the

gaieties of the masquerade was shining on carnage and on combat; the splendours of the palace were stretching out and away beyond aisle on aisle of porphyry columns, through circle on circle of rose-wreathed arches, while without, through the marble pillars of the piazza, were the silver silence of the night and the shadows of innumerable forms gathering closer and closer to seal all hope from those who fought for liberty.

Idalia stood tranquil; and as they saw the serene disdain, the unwavering courage, the mercenaries of the king paused involuntarily. They *dared* not fire on her.

The voice from the gardens rang imperiously through the stillness.

"Dastards! you shall be shot down with them. Fire!"

The last word was not for the halting and paralysed soldiers of the front; it reached farther, to where, unseen, the picked men of Francis's Guard had marched noiselessly through the opposite doors of the banqueting-room, and circled the band of patriots in the rear with an impassable barrier—meshing them in one net beyond escape. They had not heard, they had not seen, they knew nothing of the ambuscade behind them, where they stood

gathered around Idalia, facing their foes and holding them back by the menace of their eyes, as men hold back wild beasts, in gallant and dauntless chivalry, willing each one of them to lay down his life that night rather than yield her up in passive cowardice to her foes. They never saw, they never heard—behind them stole the murderous tread, filling up the rear of the lofty hall with rank on rank of soldiers. Then suddenly, as the word to fire rang in its merciless command from the outer court, the line of rifles belched forth its flame; the sullen roar of the shots echoed through the chamber, raking the glittering colours of the masquerade robes as the driving hail rakes the wheat and the flowers of a full corn-field. Shot down from the rear in that craven murder, they fell, the balls in their brains or their shoulders—a fourth of them levelled low; yet not a moan, not a cry escaped one of them, not a prayer broke from the lips wet with their life-blood, not a sigh escaped those whose nerves were rent, whose bones were shattered, whose lungs were pierced by that dastardly masked attack. Not a cry, not a supplication, broke even from Idalia, as the crash of the firing rolled over the devoted band that guarded her. Not for the first time did she look on bloodshed, nor for

the first time meet the likeness of her death; but as they fell downward at her feet, stricken like felled trees, a mortal anguish came into her fearless eyes; she stretched her arms out less with entreaty than command.

"Spare them! To save *them*, I will surrender."

"By Christ, not for ten thousand lives!" cried Carlo of Viana, where he stood out of the deadly press, his reeking sword held aloft before her. "Surrender you! They shall only take you when we all lie dead around you!"

She grasped his arm and looked up in his face: there was no more of fear, no more of shrinking, than there were on his own; only in her eyes a superb heroism, on her lips a passionate entreaty.

"Serve me better still, my noble friend! Turn your sword *here*."

The tumult was at its height; emboldened by the fate of those shot down from the rear, the Royalists of the front pressed in. Wedged between two barriers, the patriots fought with mad despair. Where Viana stood, pausing one instant as she turned and made her prayer to him, he knew that death were sweeter far to her than the fate that

would await her from her foes; he knew that she had in her the courage of Lucretia, the force of the wife of Pætus; but to slay with his own hand that perfect loveliness, to destroy with his own steel the pulse of that splendid and gracious life!—he drooped his head with a shudder, "I *cannot!*"

Scarcely had the words left his lips when the blade of a bayonet pierced his lungs; he fell like a mighty cedar lightning-stricken, not dead, but dying fast. The roar of the combat, the ring of the shots, the tumult of the conflict, as the betrayed were pressed between the wedge of the Royalist van and rear, were filling his palace-chambers with their riot; he knew no more of sight, or sound, or life. He only looked up with blind eyes, that, through their mists, vainly and solely sought for one; his lips parted with a murmur, "Idalia!—Italy!" Then, with those names his latest utterance, a shiver shook him as the red blood streamed through all the laces and the silks, the violet and the silver and the jewels of his dress, and, with one other deep-drawn, lingering sigh—he died.

She sank beside him on her knees, and her own danger and the conflict of the night that raged in

its fiery struggle, its mortal misery, around, died from her memory, and grew dull upon her sense. She only remembered the man who lay here at her feet—dead; dead through the love he bore her; dead through the creeds she had breathed in him; dead for her and by her, as though her hand had slain him.

The fearless grandeur faded from her face, that had been there throughout all chance of her own death; it grew white, and cold, and fixed; a tearless grief, a burning remorse, were in her eyes, which only saw that crimson stream of flowing blood staining the tesselated floor, and that brave, bold, serene face turned upward to the light of million lamps studding like stars the vault of the dome above.

"Let them take me," she thought, "it is just. What am I better than a murderess?"

From the gloom of the outer court rang once more the voice of command.

"Seize *her!* You can choke the dogs of rebels at your leisure."

She never heard the pitiless clarion of those clear tones; she never felt the hiss of the balls past her; she never saw the ghastly conflict that filled the palace festive chambers with its clamour and its

carnage, as men armed strong with the weight of tyranny and law pressed down on men who fought for liberty, for conscience, for their land, and for their lives. She thought only of the dead who lay around her.

Two officers of the guard, obedient, stooped and laid their grasp upon her; the action roused her from the unconscious stupor with which she knelt beside the lifeless limbs; she shook them off and rose facing them, still with that look of terrible remorse in her tearless eyes, though on her face were a scorn and a daring which held those whom she threw off at bay as surely as the most desperate resistance of shot or steel.

She glanced down the hall, under the dome of the light-studded ceiling that stretched over so vast an area, that had been a few brief moments before filled with music and mirth and the murmur of laughing voices. She took no heed of those who had sought to seize her, but her eyes gazed with an infinite yearning out on her defenders holding that unequal life-and-death struggle between the closing bayonets, and her voice echoed, clear and eloquent, yet with a misery that thrilled the hearts even of her enemies.

"My friends—my friends!—lose no more for me.

Death is liberty, but it cannot be mine; give me no other murdered lives to lie heavy on my own. Save yourselves by surrender, by flight, how you can, and think no more of me. The future will yet avenge us all."

The voice of the chief in command rang down again from the dusky shadows of the piazza.

"Soldiers! seize and silence her. She speaks sedition."

The officers, gentler than he who hounded them on to their work, stooped, hesitating, to her.

"You surrender?"

She looked at them with a look that for the moment flashed back all the proud contemptuous light upon her face, and lit in her deep eyes the glow of the old heroism.

"If the carnage cease."

The voice from the outer courts answered her, imperious and unyielding—

"We make no terms with revolutionists and rebels."

"I make no peace with tyrants and assassins."

Her return-defiance challenged her unseen foe with a calm grandeur; she stood above the fallen

dead as some prophetess of Israel, some goddess in the Homeric age, might have stood above the slain, and called down vengeance.

From the darkness of the piazza a hot and heavy oath broke through the clamour.

"Yield! or we will deal with you as we deal with men."

A smile of utter unspeakable scorn passed over her lips—scorn for the cowardice that could threaten her thus—scorn for the craven temper that could deem death so victorious a menace.

She looked down tranquilly on the gleaming barrels of the rifles, and as her lover, in the far Carpathian pass, had given the word for his own death-shot, so she gave hers now. Her eyes rested steadily on the Royalists.

"Fire!"

The soldiers of the King gazed at her, then dropped the muzzles of their muskets slowly downward and downward; they hung their heads, and their eyes fell, while from one to another ran a sullen rebellious murmur,

"*Non possiamo!*"

There was an instant's intense stillness once more; the tumult ceased, the clamour died away, the uplifted steel sank, the iron grip relaxed; aggressors

and defenders, revolutionists and royalists, alike were mute and awed before the courage of one woman. Then, with the fury of a mighty oath; a fresh command was hissed in its ferocity from the garden gloom, where the chiefs looked on into the courts and chambers.

"Make her captive, dead or living!"

There were ruffians in that Royal Guard, brigands of the Abruzzi, mountaineers of Calabria, who had imbrued their hands in innocent blood, and knew no check upon their crimes, though they would mutter Aves for their black and poisonous souls like any nun before her crucifix. These heard but to obey. They launched themselves upon her; they flung themselves through the press to seize her; their swords flashed naked above her head; their ravenous eyes fed gloatingly upon her jewels and her beauty; their brutal hands stretched ruthlessly to grasp and crush the gold of the shining hair, the mould of the delicate limbs, the fairness of the transparent skin; their gripe was on her shoulder, their breath was on her bosom. With the horror, and the grace, of outraged dignity, Idalia shook their hold from her, and drew herself from the loathsome insult of their villanous contact; her eyes shone with the lustre of a passionate scorn, her voice mellow, imperious, un-

shaken, rang outward to the terrace where her tyrants herded.

"I surrender!—not to escape death, but to escape the pollution of your touch."

CHAPTER VIII.

"THE DEVIL TEMPTED ME, AND I DID EAT."

In the Neapolitan palazetto, which was the residence of Victor Vane, the light of the summer morning made its way through half-closed blinds, the odours of orange and myrtle were heavy to oppression on the air, the waters beat a lulling measure below, at the foot of the little pier; it was still, soft, indolently charming, slumberously restful in the noontide hush; yet he himself—commonly so calm, so languid, so supreme an artist in the science of lazy pleasures—had no repose in it or in his own life. He was pacing up and down the chamber that opened on the terrace with a restless impatience, a feverish irritation with all things that were about him. He drank down some claret fresh from the ice; it seemed to have no coolness in it; he twisted some grapes asunder, and they seemed to parch his mouth; he smoked an opium-filled narghilé, and flung the tube away with a curse—the nicotine had

lost its charm, and irritated where it was wont to soothe; then he flung himself down on a couch, with his head dropped on his hands, and sat there immovable many moments, with a quick shudder running through his limbs, and the silence about him like a dead intolerable weight. For now that his work was done he loathed it; now that he had betrayed her, he could have killed himself; now that he had given her over to captivity and torture, he was haunted, and wrung, and maddened with the thoughts that for ever pursued him. Yet—he would not have undone it if he could; he would not have foregone his revenge had it been in his power; since she was denied to him, he loved to know that she suffered, that she had pain, and fetters, and shame, that she would live to wish she had listened to his love, and to feel the cost of having mocked him and repulsed him.

She had refused him all the sweetness of passion; he would not have loosened his hand on its vengeance. Since she could never be his, let her lose all likeness of herself, and perish as she might! There was fierceness enough in him to feel that ruthlessly; there was sufficient savageness in him beneath the polish of the world and the serenity of his egotism to be eager—thirstily and brutally eager

—to know that what was beyond his reach, what he sought vainly, what he desired unavailingly, would be scourged, and defaced, and insulted, and shut out from all place on the earth. And yet, though he had given her up to her suffering, and would not, had he owned the power now, have released her from one pang of it, he suffered himself—suffered a torture not less than that to which he had delivered her. He knew the doom that would be hers under the revenge of a Church and a State so bitterly incensed against her; he knew that the net which had enclosed her would never unloose to let her issue with her life; he knew that if she ever came forth from the captivity into which he had betrayed her, it would only be when bondage, and stripes, and the companionship of infamy, and the approach of age, would leave no trace on her of all which she once had been; he knew—for against them all his hatred had been borne and his skill arrayed—the full meaning of the tyrannies of Bourbon and of Rome: and there were times when his passion endured agonies at the memory of the scourge that would cut the fairness of her skin, of the rough hands that would unveil her beauty, of the gaol-ruffians who would strip the delicate raiment off her limbs, of the villanous glances that would gloat unchecked on her fallen

loveliness. Mercy he had none; such love as he had borne her was of the character to change into a relentless and envenomed hate; but it was passion still, and there were times when the thought of her yielded up to her adversary's will, and buried for ever beneath the stones of a dungeon-vault, drove his own revenge back into his heart, and tortured him not less than that revenge could her. Moreover, he had betrayed her; he had sold her into the hands of her foes, and though the subtle art of silken treachery had long been a science in whose proficiency he took his highest pride, there was manhood and there was dignity enough in him to make his forehead burn with a red flush of shame when there rose in remembrance before him the challenge of her eyes, and to make him long to know her dead in her youth, so that those eyes should never be turned on him in accusation and rebuke.

"Great heaven!" he muttered in his teeth, where he lay with his head sunk on his arms, "if she would only have *believed* I loved her!"

That was the one misery which had goaded him on to his crime. For once in his life he had been in earnest; for the sole time, from his boyhood up, an emotion genuine, however alloyed, had risen in

him. In what he had felt for Idalia he had been true, with a truth he had never known before; for her he would have become anything that she had bidden him; to win her he would have endured and achieved all tasks she could have pointed out; and in the single hour in which this sincerity and this reality had possessed him, his own sceptical mockery had recoiled on him in hers; he had been powerless to induce her to hear one beat save that of egotism in his heart; he had been powerless to make her credit one throb of love or loyalty in him. That she should have rejected him he would have pardoned her; that she *disbelieved* him was the iron which went so far down into his soul, and changed every desire in him into one cruel thirst—the thirst for his vengeance and for her destruction. She had contemptuously doubted the force of his love. Well! he had said in his teeth that she should feel that force—feel it in the weight of fetters, in the burden of ignominy, in the oppression of dungeon solitude—feel it till she cursed the day that ever she braved it and mocked at it.

Awhile ago, and he would have laughed in the beard of any man who should have told him that such barbaric folly, such desert passions as these, could ever blind and rule him. Now he never

resisted their sway, but let them burn out his strength and consume his intellect as they would. There were times when he shook opiates into his wines with a hand that recked little whether it shook too little or too much, and would have poured out a death-dose without a tremor; times when ambition seemed worthless as autumn leaves, and he loathed life because life could never yield to him the beauty of one woman. All who once loved Idalia drank of a mandragora that left them little of their natures, nothing of their wisdom. Even he had no antidote against it, but let it steal away his brain and pour its fire through his limbs till the soft courtier grew a brute, till the subtle politician became a fool, till the gentleman turned a traitor.

A sound in one of the many chambers leading off from the terrace-room in which he was, roused him. He was still too much governed by long habit and discipline not to recover himself instantly. Whatever he felt was only given way to in loneliness; no looker-on could see any change in his delicate, immutable face, in his soft calm smile, in his easy velvet indolence; he would have profited little by his long study of the world if he could not have held his own in finesse to the last.

Into the apartment, with little ceremony and no

apology, Conrad Phaulcon came. His disguise was perfect. He was used to assume one at any hour and for any need; and in the dress of a melon-seller, with his fair skin stained and his auburn beard dyed black, his closest friend might have passed him by, his sworn foe failed to challenge him. He neither paused to watch nor ask if his host penetrated the mask as he swept up towards Vane, his mobile mouth working, and his large brown eyes aflame.

"Is this true?"

Victor had known him before he had heard his voice, and was on his guard. He shrugged his shoulders where he leaned against the side of the vine-shadowed window.

"You incarnate volcano! you will destroy us all some day! An ostensible melon-seller forcing his way in to me in this fashion! Have you ever stopped to remember what the household can think?"

"Felix admitted me, and I gave him the pass-word. But, answer me, for God's sake, what of Idalia?——"

"What of her? Why, this of her, *caro*, that she is the subject for a tragic study by that eminent artist Monsignore Giulio Villaflor, to which you

will form a companion picture if you trust to a basket of melons to pass you unnoticed through Naples."

The words were quite cool, quite unstudied, with just enough of regret in their half-languid banter to keep them from being mockery. Phaulcon's fine frame shook passionately as he heard; under the olive dye his cheek grew ashen; he threw himself down and sobbed like a child, wept as if his heart would break, in uncontrolled emotion.

His friend stood looking at him some moments in silence with a certain impatient disdain. This Greek, handsome as an Apollo, cruel at times as a Nero, and stained deep with many a crime, was yet as a child in the sight of the more controlled and astute Englishman; a child in cowardice, in impulsiveness, in caprice, in tyranny, in emotion, with all a child's unguardedness, recklessness, mobility, and love of torture.

"Naturally, you regret!" he said, at last, very softly. "You have not even killed your goose with the golden eggs yourself, my poor Conrad, but see bird and gold both stolen at a blow! Very naturally, you regret!"

The silken irony, the mockery of pity, stung Phaulcon like a shot. He started up, dashing the

waves of his hair out of his eyes, while great drops of dew stood on his forehead.

"Can you credit me nothing better than that?"

"*Caro mio*, how can I credit you with anything better than caring for money? It is the one prudential virtue which the world *does* crown!"

The Greek's teeth crushed his silken beard, while his features quivered with the vivid, uncontrolled emotion of his changing temperament.

"I am not thinking of her wealth; I think of *her*—of my own sins to her, of her beauty, of her genius, of her life."

His voice sank in a deep sob; he spoke but the truth for the moment; he thought for the instant not of himself, but of Idalia; not of his own danger, not of his own loss, but of her torture. He loved her in his wayward, tyrannous way; and for awhile the love alone remained with him.

"She is in the power of Villaflor!" he said, fiercely. Remorse was in him, and remorse made him long to wreak some savage vengeance somewhere; he would have little cared how or on whom.

"They say so. You know as much as I do. It has been a terrible blow to us; to keep quiet, and cover as much as we can, is all we shall be able to do. There was great carnage at Antina, and the

arrests swept off all the musketry spared—among them your Countess. Indeed, she was doubtless the chief object of all."

"Where have they taken her?"

He spoke in his throat. At that moment he would have rather had a hundred balls fired into his own breast than have heard this of the woman he had so pitilessly chained and tormented.

"*Poverino!* how can we tell? It is not the fashion of the court to disclose its secrets, nor of Monsignore to let profane eyes see where his nets are spread."

His voice was unmoved, and almost careless, though it wore a natural gravity of regret, but in his heart he endured an agony greater than that of the man before him; the thought crossed him, to what fate would the Prince-Bishop devote a captive of the sex and the years and the charms of the prisoner he had betrayed to him?

Phaulcon's hand clenched; the muscles of his throat and chest, where the loose shirt of the *contadino* left them to view, swelled to bursting. Idalia was his treasury, his sovereignty, his world, his sceptre; without her he was nothing; of her he had made with a twisted mixture in him of fear and homage, of tyranny and weakness, of hate and love,

an empress who to him alone out of all the earth was a slave, an enchanted wand with which he summoned what he would, an idol that he treated as hunters treated their statue of Pan when they reviled him because they needed more wealth than he gave, and yet feared him with a strange mingling of dread, of reverence, and of jealous love.

"Villaflor?" he repeated hoarsely. "That Satan of the Church? Better she had gone at once to her death. Are you sure? How can you know?"

Vane had let slip in a momentary incaution the name of his great priestly confederate; he veiled the indiscretion with his finest tact.

"How can I doubt?" he said, with an acrid impatience that passed well enough for aversion to a mutual and omnipotent foe. "Was Giulio Villaflor ever absent from such errands as those? Did his brain ever fail to hatch such plots as those by which the maskers of Antina were entrapped, however little his hand might be seen, or his will be guessed in them? His special hatred always bore down on the Countess Vassalis; there is no more doubt that he works beneath this, if he do not wholly originate and govern it, than there is doubt that the sun is shining out yonder."

Phaulcon swore a mighty oath in his teeth as his lips shook, and his face flushed purple.

"If he harm her, I will find my way into his palace and drive a dagger down his throat, though he stand at the altar itself!"

"*Carissimo!* what would that avail, except to have you hanged, or disposed of in a still less humane fashion? Be reasonable. Tragedy will avail nothing. If you killed Villaflor, there would remain a score of monsignori to take his place and play his cards. The arrest of Madame de Vassalis is a terrible stroke for us—we could better have afforded to lose fifty men than to lose your irresistible Idalia; at the same time we shall not better her, and we shall surely imperil ourselves and all our projects, if we go like men in a melodrama, slaying priests and calling on the gods for vengeance."

"What! You would have us stand calmly by in inaction while she may be—may be——" The words choked him; he knew what the power of Giulio Villaflor meant to all, meant above all to a woman.

"Inaction! What action can you suggest?"

The Greek was silent; his swift thoughts swept, far over a thousand schemes that rose only to bear with them the sentence of impossibility.

"I—as eagerly as yourself—would be the first to try all things, and to risk much in the service of the Countess Vassalis," pursued Vane, with the soft, even, almost unnatural calm which he had held throughout his interview with the Roman prelate. "But, frankly, I see nothing that is to be done with any sort of benefit. To penetrate the secrets of the government will take time, and, what we have very little of, money; to avow ourselves her partisans will be only at once to share her imprisonment and be lodged in the casemates yonder; to attempt a rescue requires the one thing we do not possess—knowledge of where she has been taken. What remains? We are as helpless, so far as I can see, as if their chains were already about our limbs. There is nothing for it—yet at least—except to wait and watch."

Phaulcon sank down again, with his head drooped and his hands locked savagely one in another.

"You are right, I dare say," he said, bitterly; "and very cautious! But—you never loved her."

There was not even the flicker of an emotion, not the faintest flush on his companion's face; but a smile passed for a second over his listener's lips; he had not loved her!—he whose thwarted love had

betrayed her to her fate! The Greek's utter ignorance was almost ludicrous to him.

"Your heart and your conscience have come into sudden play, Conrad mio," he said, indolently. "I never knew before that you kept such old-world weaknesses; no one would have accused you of them!"

"Well! I have been guilty enough to her!" he answered, sullenly, with a dark red flushing his cheek; he was ashamed of his better emotion, as the man he was with now had always made him ashamed of any purer or higher touch that lingered in him.

"It is rather late in the day to think of that!"

"Too late!—my God!"

A terrible remorse was on him, passing, fitful, evanescent, but very ardent, very contrite, whilst it was in its first poignancy, whilst he thought of the ghastly doom in which had closed the splendid life that he had made and marred, the career to which he had wooed and to which he had enchained the youth and the power and the genius of Idalia—a remorse in which he suffered acutely; in which the uncertainty and the peril of her unknown fate were tortures to him; in which he seemed very vile, very accursed in his own sight.

His friend looked on impatiently; it incensed him to see this callous, thoughtless, tyrannous, unscrupulous Greek moved by her danger thus; it made his own traitor-shame weigh heavier on his heart. He did not lose his self-command; but he spoke almost insolently, on the spur of the misery that he choked down out of sight.

"Your beautiful Countess is too fair for the scourge and the cell, there is no doubt of that. I dare say she will never be condemned to them. Giulio Villaflor has too good a taste for such dainty paintings to shut them in solitude; he will not be likely to let so rare a flower wither in a prison-court. Miladi Idalia has better coin to buy indulgence with than all the gold of Europe!"

In his own wretchedness it was a cruel relief to him to fling dishonour at the woman he had betrayed, and to torment the man whose self-acusing contrition made him feel more sharply his own baseness.

Conrad Phaulcon started up impetuously, with deadly blasphemies muttered under his breath, as he paced the chamber like a leopard lashed to fury.

"You do not know Idalia," he said, savagely. "She would die sooner——"

Vane laughed a flippant, nonchalant, silvery laugh.

"Oh, believe me, fair women are not so enamoured of the ugliness of death; and—as for the rest—she has gone very far for the sake of public liberty; she will scarce grudge a good price for personal freedom. Not know Idalia? *Altro!* I don't think, with all your title to her confidence, that you know her very thoroughly yourself. Perhaps she will treat with Villaflor *de couronne à couronne.* We are playing a losing game; she will have the tact of her sex and go over to the stronger side. She is far more fit for courts than conspiracies. She could make good terms, I have little doubt, and I would back her to match the bishop in subtlety,—I could scarcely give as much praise to any one else in Europe."

"You mean that——"

"That she will forsake us and coalesce with the royalties. All women are rakes at heart, as Pope says, and he should have given an alliterative line to it,—all women are royalists. They may talk liberalism, but they are Optimates to the core, and adore a despot, public or private. Madame de Vassalis will see herself in imminent danger; she will barter herself and her knowledge and her power to buy her emancipation. Not a doubt of it. She is a republican; she is of the advanced school; she is '*of us*'—oh yes! but she is a woman of the world,

a wonderfully clever one too, and she will do what is expedient, and never die for a chimera."

He more than half believed what he said; he saw far into Idalia's character, but not far enough to fully gauge its depth. He had, moreover, a natural disbelief in the existence of any nature proof against a bribe, or capable of preferring a creed to a sovereignty. The Greek looked at him with fiery scorn.

"You think that? I tell you that, rather than play for one hour into the hands of King or Church, Idalia would suffer a hundred deaths. Her word is her bond, and treachery has no place with her; she will never buy liberty by a renegade's cowardice——"

"Sublimely virtuous, but—scarcely true, I fancy. Miladi is too world-wise to be an idealist."

He spoke carelessly: but such conscience as was in him, and all manliness that had not been polished away by the plane of sophism and of expediency, were pierced to the quick by the words that unwittingly stung him so closely.

"By the way," he went on carelessly, "I dare say that the Court, having snared her, would be willing to treat with you. What do you say, amico mio? You have not made a very good thing of Liberalism;

would you try Absolutism for a time, and change the Phrygian bonnet for a Neapolitan coronet?"

"*I!*"

"Well—you. If they do not take you prisoner too, you may conclude very good terms just now, in all probability. Our party is bruised, but not killed. We have danger enough in us to render us worth bribing, though not strength enough to give us a straw's weight of success. Under the circumstances, you might make a very lucrative bargain. There is no reason on earth why a democratic *condottiere* like you, my good Conrad, should not be metamorphosed into a courtier and a son of the Church. What do you think of it?"

Phaulcon's eyes had fastened on him throughout his speech with a glistening light that he—he who had told the Prince-Bishop that he could buy this man at a moment's notice—had construed as the eagerness for change, for security, and for a costly bribe, of an avaricious and reckless adventurer. As he ceased, the Greek's rich voice broke across his final words like thunder.

"By Heaven, if I thought you spoke in earnest I would kill you where you sit! If I did such villany as you hint at, I should deserve the shot or the steel that would find its way to me as surely as

night follows day. *You* tempt me to such shame—you!"

Victor raised his hand with a slight warning gesture; the gesture that controlled his companion's tumultuous passions like a spell.

"Why not?—*to try you?* Frankly, I scarce gave you credit for such sublimated idealogy and self-devotion. Do you mean to say that you would rather swing or be shot by the Bourbons to-morrow than get a court place and an Italian title?"

He spoke with a contemptuous, incredulous insolence; he would as soon have expected Vesuvius to vomit gold and diamonds as to find anything like loyalty and probity in the man he dealt with—a man who checked at no crime, and knew no contrition.

The Greek flushed restlessly and painfully under the brown dye of his skin.

"Sneer as you will," he said, sullenly, "I have so much conscience in me, whether you believe it or not. I am vile enough, I dare say, but I am not so vile as *that.* There are few sins I have not plunged into, there is not one that I fear; but a renegade I never was yet, and never will be. By Heavens! if I felt myself turning traitor, if I thought that my strength would fail me to keep true, I

would set the mouth of a pistol against my own head before my lips had time to dishonour me!"

In the moment he was true; in the moment the one higher thing in his nature asserted its domination; with all his falsity, his guilt, his ruthlessness, his baseness—and these were very black—he was loyal to an idea, he was faithful to a bond. He would betray others without a scruple, but he would not turn a traitor to his cause; he had so much still left of affinity with the codes and the freedom that he ostensibly served. It went far to redeem him, all warped and erring though it was—went far to raise him above the higher intelligence and the finer subtlety of the man who tempted him.

Vane heard him with an acrid wrath; this madman, this tool, this wax in his hands, this guilt-stained adventurer, whom he thought no more of than he thought of any pistol that he could use as he would, full of danger to others but to him a mere toy of wood and of steel, shamed him, stung him, escaped from him. What Conrad Phaulcon shrank from as too foul to stoop to must be foul indeed!

"I congratulate you on your new nobility, mon cher," he said, indolently, with that covert sneer which the Greek had learned to dread as a hound dreads the lash. "I did not know there was any-

thing you *had* scruples about, but I am glad there should be;—it is a new experience! I take your assurances, however, *cum grano salis;*—you are quite wise to make them so fervently, seeing that, as you observed, a shot or a stab would follow your desertion as surely as night follows day. And now, you will allow me to remark that you are very imperfectly disguised, that you will involve me very disagreeably if you are discovered here, and that I shall thank you to remove yourself from Naples at once."

"But Idalia?"

"You can serve Idalia in nothing by putting yourself and every one else in jeopardy. The Church has her; the Church does not lightly let go its prey. All that can be done, you are sure, will be done——"

"But——"

Victor lifted his hand again; a very slight gentle movement, but before it the fiery impetuosity, the mutinous impatience, of the Greek fell into a soldier's submissiveness, a spaniel's docility. In their armies there were many ranks, but there was only one discipline—implicit obedience and silence unto death. If his chief had bidden him throw himself from the heights of Tiberio, Phaulcon would have cast himself headlong down without a question,

when once they stood on the ground which that slight gesture warned him they were on now—the ground of authority on one side, of obedience on the other.

"Leave all to me. And for the present quit Naples while you can—if you can. Go to the old quarters at Paris immediately, and there await instructions. Adieu!"

Phaulcon's eyes looked at him with a piteous entreaty; he did not speak, but the great muscles of his throat swelled and throbbed, and his nervous hands clenched; the mute appeal spoke better than any words his prayer against that merciless dismissal.

"Go, *caro*," said his tyrant, gently; but the gentleness was immutable and cold. "If you feel such tenderness for your fair Countess, you should not have drawn her into such dangerous paths. Make yourself easy; she can take care of herself; there are few men—and I doubt if Giulio Villaflor be one of the few—who can match the wit and the science of La Vassalis. Now, go; your presence is embarrassing, and your melons are a blunder; but you always would be so impetuous! *Bon voyage;* and if the Bourbonists should stop you on the way, remember—and die mute. An unpleasant and dis-

courteous allusion, I confess; but one must face possible contingencies."

Conrad Phaulcon looked at him one moment with a fierce glare under his curling lashes; but for the bond that bound and the authority that fettered him, he would have tossed up the Northerner's slender frame in his strong lithe arms, and dashed on the marble without those subtle astute brains that baffled and that ruled him. Then he dropped his head as a chidden hound drops his—and went.

Alone, his chief sat motionless, his eyes fixed, his arms resting on the table before him, his face white and rigid as though its profile were the profile of a marble bust. He had been bitterly stung, though he had never shown it; he had been deeply moved, though he had given no sign of it. This lawless tiger, this velvet-skinned wild brute, this worthless adventurer, this mountain-thief, who shot men as willingly as he shot sea-birds, had flung off treachery as a villany too black for him; and he—a scholar, a gentleman, a wit, a man who ridiculed the barbaric errors of crime, and who knew that he had in him intellect to compass the statecraft of half a world—had found no issue for his ambitions, no crown to his career, no end for his attainments, except a traitor's shame! No rebuke

from pure or lofty lives would have made him feel his own degradation so deeply as the revolt of the man whose hardened guilt he had known so long, and whose scruples he had never before found check at any baseness that was offered him; the man in whom he had himself killed all remnant of better instincts, and whom he had looked on as a mercenary, to be hired at will for any infamy, by whichever side could bid the highest. No scorn from those of stainless honour or of blameless deeds could have cut him so unendurably as the contempt for his own sin of renegade betrayal which had flashed from the glance and lashed him in the words of the Greek, whom he had known steeled to all remorse and careless of all disgrace.

"Faugh!" he thought, with a disdainful bitterness that availed little to reconcile him to himself; "his is just such bastard honour, such childish folly, as we see a thousand times over in the most shameless scoundrels of Europe. The brigand murders at his fancy, and reverences a leaden saint in his hat; the brutes of the Abruzzi flay their prisoners, and pray to the Madonna; the soldiers of the Pope kill women and children as they would cut the throats of pigs, and tremble when their master blesses them on Easter-day;—it is all over the

world, that trash of superstition, that fit of spurious repentance, that ague-attack of poltroonery which men, because they are ashamed of it, dignify into conscience or creed! He would sell his soul to the devil if there were such a thing as a devil, and yet he prides himself on clinging to an idea which he has never followed except for the sake of adventure and self-interest, and to a cause which he has never embraced except as a vent for his own listlessness and discontent! And men call that king of straw, that random folly, that weakness cloaked in borrowed purples, *honour!*"

But the ironies that he wove to himself, the contempt in which he strove to steep and still the pangs of shame that Conrad Phaulcon's single virtue had awakened, had little potency. He was a gentleman, and the disgrace of his sin was as gall to him. Something of that humiliation and unendurable hatred for his own act which made Iscariot slay himself, finding no value in the silver pieces for whose glitter he had wrecked his peace and sold the guiltless, smote even through the ice-mail of his graceful callousness, the steel cuirass of his worldly policies.

And—though cowardice had no place in him, as it had in the fiery but mobile temper of Phaulcon—a shiver ran through him as he thought of those

words—"the shot or the steel that follows the renegade, as the night follows the day." He knew that they were no hyperbole, no metaphor; he knew that men who were false to the political Order of which they were sworn, died so by that Order's vengeance, almost as surely as darkness falls on the sun's setting —died with a dagger-stroke in the winter nights of Rome, a pistol-shot in the gay chambers of Paris, a blow from behind in the riotous carnival times of Venice; died wherever they were, struck by unerring hands, and knowing that it was but wild justice for their own Judas sin, though the world saw in their fall but some common street scuffle, some murder of continental lawlessness, some thief's assassination for a few gold coins.

He knew it, and a chill tremor passed over him as he mused. But a few months before, a sculptor had been found at the door of his studio in Rome with a great wound slashed across his breast, and the blood choking his voice, so that he died speechless. The talk of the day had drafted that death in amongst the deeds of violence that Roman thieves will deal in, and babbled of the insecurity of life under the Papal tenure, and of the sad fate of the young genius struck down for a few bajocchi on his own threshold. Victor Vane had been aware, as many

like him also, that no Roman thief had been the dealer of that stroke home to the lungs as the sculptor felt his way up the dark winding staircase, whose blackness the oil flicker of a single lamp only rendered deeper gloom; but that it had been a pitiless vengeance for an oath taken in boyhood, and in manhood broken.

He knew it; wherever he went, whatever he did, howsoever high he rose in eminence, whatsoever fruitage he gathered from the seed of treachery, the possibility of that doom would pursue him, the dread of it would haunt him—a worse fate than the stroke itself, sharply and swiftly dealt. The sword would ever hang above his head wherever his banquet should be spread, whatever nobles and princes should be summoned to it. Let him dupe his early comrades, or reign in his new sovereignties as he would, he could never dismiss this from him —this chance, that soon or late the vengeance for his desertion would search him out, and strike him in the hour of his surest security, of his proudest triumph.

Yet the step was taken; there was no receding now, and he knew that he had in him to rule empires if once he could grasp but the hem of power. He ground his teeth where he gazed down

on the mosaic on which his arms rested, with the sharply-defined delicacy of his features, death-white in the golden sun-glow that fell through the broad leaves of vine.

"I was wrong to say there is no devil," he thought; "there is one that cripples the strongest and tempts the wisest, and sets the fool above the sage, and kicks genius into a hovel to die, and gives diadems to idiots, and makes great lives plod wearily for daily bread round the ass's mill, and in the ass's shafts; there is a devil that runs riot in the world, flinging all the prizes to the dullards who let them rust, and tossing all the blanks to the men who only want a chance to prove their mettle; there is a devil that leaves thrones to brainless dullards, and scratches out the winning blood from every race because it has no pedigree, that fills swine's troughs with pearls, and seals lips that drop eloquence; there is a devil that flings the wheat to the flames, and calls the chaff blessed bread, that lames the boldest ere they can start, and curses the new-born child in his cradle; there *is* a devil—the devil of Caste!"

When the failings of Democracy are hooted against her, one fair thing in her should be remembered—that in her sovereignties this one deadly

bitterness, this passionate, poignant regret for all he *might have been*, had not Position warped, and cramped, and proscribed, and starved him, can come unto no man.

And there is no evil worse than this; for by it the man casts back on accident (and often with a terrible justice) all the errors, the failures, the sins, and the disgraces of his life. "I never had a fair field!"—it may be sometimes a coward's apology; but it is many a time the epitome of a great, cramped, tortured, wasted life, which strove like a caged eagle to get free, and never could beat down the bars of the den that circumstances and prejudice had forged. The world sees the few who do reach freedom, and, watching their bold upward flight, says rashly, "will can work all things." But they who perish by the thousand, the fettered eagles who never see the sun; who pant in darkness, and wear their breasts bare beating on the iron that will never yield; who know their strength, yet cannot break their prison; who feel their wings, yet never can soar up to meet the sweet wild western winds of liberty; who lie at last beaten, and hopeless, and blind, with only strength enough to long for death to come and quench all sense and thought in its annihilation,—who thinks of them—who counts them?

Where he sat, with his teeth clenched and the nerve of his lips twitching, the finished tactician cursed his fate as passionately as any Gilbert on his death-bed, any Mirabeau in his dungeon. A consuming passion was upon him; and under it his philosophies mocked and his worldly wisdom forsook him. It had made him a traitor; it made him now weak as any woman. While he had lightly laughed with a scoff to the Greek of her sorcery over the Italian Prelate, his heart had been sick with jealousy and dread. He had remembered too late what manner of man Giulio Villaflor was; what manner of ransom the voluptuous Churchman was likely to exact from such a captive as he possessed now. He had thought too late that, in yielding her up to her foe, he was delivering the woman he loved to one who would feel the spell of her beauty as utterly as he, and would be armed with the power to do with that beauty howsoever he would. So that he were revenged on her, he had never heeded how that vengeance might recoil. It smote him keenly now, as he mused on the amorous, ruthless, unscrupulous priest to whom he had surrendered her.

In the power of Giulio Villaflor!—he turned hot and cold as the memory passed over him. He had delivered her into bondage, that she might be shut

away from all eyes—that her smile might be seen of none—that what could not be his should be no other's—that the empire of her sorcery should end for ever in a life of ignominy, of suffering, and of slavery. But now he shuddered where he sat immovable, with the yellow light streaming down through the vine; he had given her over to one who never spared, to one who would look on her loveliness at once with the admiration of a voluptuary and the sway of a tyrant; to one who could offer her release from lifelong misery as the purchase coin of her love, or could take it, if denied, with the mailed grasp of an irresistible and irresponsible dominion.

It fascinated him with its very horror, it enchained him with its very torture, this thought which he had flung at the name of Idalia, to insult her and to taunt his companion, and which grew into a phantom that he could not exorcise, a vision that he could not drive away. Every second was horrible to him; he saw the sovereign grace, the proud glance of the woman he had betrayed; he saw the full lustrous eyes of the arrogant priest as they would be bent upon her; and he writhed as under some bodily agony—he had dealt himself a sharper torment than any he had condemned

her to endure. He had given her to bondage—yes, but he had given her also to Giulio Villaflor!

There are women who rouse a passion far more intense than can be held in the word love, which makes the man who feels it lose all semblance of himself, which sweeps away his memory, his honour, his reason, his ambitions, his very nature, and leaves him no sense of anything save itself. This was the passion which made her traitor now—cold, and keen, and subtle, and world-worn, and sceptical as he had been—choke down the great sobs in his throat, as he thought:

"Only to know her dead, so that no other can ever look on her; only to know that! Dead, dead, dead! she would seem mine then. And yet—I should rifle her grave like the madman in legends, for one sight of her face, for one touch of her lips!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE CAPTIVE OF THE CHURCH.

In the interior stood a small castellated building flanked with towers of a singular solidity and strength, and casements built deep into the solid masonry, the narrow slits and dwarfed arches of the early centuries. The country round was dreary;—marsh and osier bed, with the rushes turning from spring green to autumn hues as the season varied, and to the left, interminable olive-fields, bounded in the distance with a sombre line of cypress, had little beauty, even when the southern sunset gave them its glow; and the place where the building stood, a black and broken pile of irregular rock, with a lake below, hemmed in by dark and stunted trees, lent only a deeper gloom and loneliness to the landscape. In the middle ages the towers had been a robber's stronghold, called the Vulture's Nest, and sorely feared by travellers; now, it was Church property, a few Cistercians held it as their convent, and, if it

were ever used for other purposes, the slow swinging of the matins' bell, which dully droned over the desolate lands around, stilled all rumour of the fact.

A tempestuous sun was setting in the west;—intense fire lighted for the moment all the rugged and monotonous expanse, flamed in the salt and sluggish waters of the tarn, and reddened all the arid desert of the parching turf. Through a lancet window it shone into a darkened barren room; the grey stone floor uncovered, the pine-wood walls as bare, and the meagre furniture of a convent cell the only things that garnished it. To and fro in the narrow limits paced, as a lioness may pace her den, Idalia. She was a prisoner of a King and of a Church—two gaolers that never in any age have loosed their prey.

The hour had come that she had long foreseen must sooner or later be her fate; she was in the hands of foes whom but a tithe of all that she had done would have sufficed to hound to their worst fury. Fear was not in her now; the blood of Artemisia and of Manual was in her veins, and the fire of the Sea Queen and of the Imperial Soldier flamed too hotly and too proudly there to let dread enter. But a terrible chafing sense of utter im-

potence, a longing to dare, to defy, to vanquish, while she was here a captive, a fearful knowledge, a passionate regret for all that she had lost, for all she might have been, made the slow moments' torturing passage unendurable — made her hands clench, her eyes flash, her whole frame quiver and rebel in mighty longing, in fearful bitterness.

She knew that she had in her what would have found power to rule an empire—and she was here the prisoner of a Priesthood!

But a more intense and a more poignant pang than that of her own adversity, of her own peril, was in her for other lives lost through her—for the manhood that had reeled and fallen at her feet, for the sightless eyes that had looked up to hers, for the dead, slaughtered through a too true adherence to her will, a too obedient rendering of her word. True, the liberty for which they had conspired was the just heritage of man, and the noblest cause for which human life can ever be laid down; true, it was for their country, and that country's welfare and freedom, that they had fallen; but this was no opiate to still the remorse that pierced and pursued her. She knew that the cause had been far less to those who had died before her than the smile of her own eyes; she

knew that with her beauty, and her power, and her sorcery, she had wooed them to passion only to drive them there, by their fealty to her, to perish like netted stags. She knew that it had been through the beguilement of her own unsparing temptation, her own ruthless witchery of fascination, that those who had been murdered in the night just gone had entered on a career which, without her, they might never have embraced.

The very masked banquet at which they had been trapped and slain had been given through her, given for her, and turned by her to that end for which the soldiers of the King had shot them down as rebels. She knew that but for her they would be living now in the fulness of their freedom and their manhood; and the remorse of an assassin seemed to weigh on her and haunt her, with the blood-red glow of that dying sun, in which the uplifted eyes of Viana, as they had sought hers through the mists of his last agony, seemed ever to gaze on her.

She was proud, she was daring, she was unscrupulous, she was self-controlled to a marvel, she was, as men counted, cruelly heartless; but in that moment Idalia could have doomed herself to the curse of any eternal travail of expiation—in that moment she could have rent out her living heart where it

beat, and have flung it to the kites that hovered in the dusky glow of twilight as the vilest, darkest, most accursed thing that ever beat with life. She had the coldness of the world, and the pitiless serenity of one long used to study strong emotions only as tools to power; but beneath her acquired calm and cynic indifference the fervency of southern nations still slept in her, and she loathed herself with the fierce unsparing hatred with which men hate their direst foe.

She did herself injustice in much, and loaded herself with heavier reproach than that which had a right to rest on her; but it is ever thus with natures strong, bold, imperial, and used to command, when from the exercise of unmerciful dominion they change to the lash of self-rebuke and self-detestation; as kings in monastic days laid down the sceptre and took up the scourge.

Of her own fate she scarce took a thought; she knew well enough that little mercy would mingle with it; but all her heart, all her mind, all her longing, were with those dead men who had perished for her, those noble and dauntless lives which had been struck down around her as though they had been murrained sheep. In her youth, in her beauty, in her wealth, in her supremacy, she was flung into

captivity, and knew that endless imprisonment, if not the shame and labour of some still more humiliating torture, would be her doom, but no throb of pity was in her for herself; the only thought upon her was the thought of those whom she told herself that she had murdered.

The bolts of the cell were undrawn with a slow grating sound; she turned and faced the door; it opened, and Giulio Villaflor entered the chamber. The ruddy flame-like light just fading in the west was shed full upon her; the masque dress she had worn had not been changed, and the diamonds on it flashed amidst its scarlet, its black, and its gold; in her weary musings she had thrust back from her temples the masses of her diamond-crowned hair, and, though her face was very colourless and her eyes heavily circled, she had never looked more magnificent than she looked now, as she turned with an empress's challenge.

Villaflor, entering with the courtly step of his habitual grace, started and paused, with a soft oath murmured involuntarily in his surprise and his admiration. He had seen her in Paris, in Spain, in Vienna; but in that instant her loveliness literally struck him blind; he came to arraign a captive, and a queen faced him in haughty and

silent disdain. Fluent, facile, a statesman and a churchman, a libertine and a courtier, he had for the moment no words; he was held in check by his own rebel prisoner.

She looked at him, and a slight smile of contempt passed over her face.

"Ah! I thought so," she said, calmly. "So *your* lambs were the wolves, holy father?"

The Prince-Bishop changed colour ever so faintly, the sarcasm of the accent rather than of the words pierced his armour of omnipotence and self-love; he understood why men had dreaded the lash and the steel less than they had dreaded the lightest touch of this woman's scorn. But he was a powerful and accomplished personage, to whom defeat or opposition were heresies unknown; he recovered his momentary discomfiture, and came nearer to her, the warm after-glow on his stately stature and his handsome majestic form, while his lustrous eyes smiled gently.

"My daughter, it has grieved us sorely that you should have been so long in rebellion against the Anointed of God; and believe me, the harshness of coercion has only been resorted to in the last extremity, and with the deepest reluctance and regret."

Idalia where she stood turned, her head, and let her eyes rest full on his, with a meaning more than any words could ever have expressed.

"Monsignore, it will be as well for us to lay aside these euphuisms. Neither of us believes them, and they weary both. Let us suppose them already uttered, and speak more truly—if a priest can speak so. I am your captive; it has long been one of the supreme ambitions of your life, and one of the most relentless efforts of your Church. I have baffled you long; you have trapped me at last. There is no more to be said."

Monsignore, the silken and astute diplomatist who wove the finest meshes of Court and Vatican intrigue, and was to be embarrassed by no living antagonist's skill, felt the blood burn under his olive skin, and felt the weakness of a bitter anger rise in him beneath the brief, tranquil, ironic words of his captive. Monsignore was never angered, the dulcet sweetness of his bland repose was never stirred by so provincial and unwise a passion; and he knew her power by that pulse of wrath she could stir in him. Yet he restrained it perfectly; he bowed with the grace for which he was renowned at St. Cloud and Compiègne.

"Pardon me, *figliuola mia*——"

"Pardon *me*, Monsignore! I am not of your communion; call me simply Madame de Vassalis."

The Prince-Bishop made a gentle deprecatory gesture with his white and elegant hands.

"Even those who have strayed from us we still hope to reclaim; and I speak as beseems me in the name of the Church. You have thought 'there is no more to be said,' since by force you have been brought within our authority. You err greatly; there are many things."

Her old superb, disdainful smile came on Idalia's face; the entrance of the churchman had roused in her all her native pride, all her worldly brilliance, all her royal defiance; she knew well enough with whom she had to deal, and the assumption of authority awoke in her all her dignity and dauntlessness.

"Many things?" she repeated, tranquilly. "Possibly! You would wish to know from me—your captive—the secrets of my party, the names of my associates, the securities of my wealth, many other matters that you consider have become yours by right through my conquest?"

Giulio Villaflor looked at her curiously, a little bewildered.

"It is so, my daughter," he said, blandly. "We would rather, you will be sure, receive these—our

rights, as you justly say—voluntarily from you than be compelled to extract them by harsher means."

She laughed a little; a soft, mocking, ironic laugh.

"I imagined so. Well—it is as I said; there is nothing to be discussed between us; for all the weight of your Church, all the steel of your Swiss, will not force one word from *me*."

Monsignore started, and the purple blood flushed under the olive of his cheek and brow; his lips quivered, his teeth clenched on the full scarlet under lip. It was so utterly new to Giulio Villaflor to be mocked and bearded—and by a woman too!

His dulcet courtliness gave way, his mellow and honeyed sweetness curdled, the fire flashed into his eyes that had used to burn in the darkling glance of the men of his great hierarchy when Savonarola braved them or Kings defied their legate.

"'Will not' is never said to Rome!" he answered, with the haughty grandeur of the mighty days of the Papacy.

She faced him with a sovereignty not less disdainful and supreme.

"Indeed! I think many who have said it have been slain by Rome, silent unto death!"

His face darkened more and more; "contumacy"

was the deadliest sin in his eyes; he would have stricken it out with the iron heel of Torquemada or Ximenes.

"Some crave death, and are forbidden it; they must *live* to do our bidding."

The words were uttered low, and the menace, though vague, was pregnant. For the moment there was intense silence, but her eyes never shrank, only in them deeper and deeper gathered the mute and fiery scorn.

"You threaten me," she said, with cool, contemptuous carelessness, reckless how she provoked, so that she stabbed him. "It is scarcely worth while to so stain your manhood and your calling, Monsignore. I am in your power. There is little dignity in menace to a prisoner."

The kingly potentate, the silken churchman, the absolute tyrant, the tortuous courtier, shook in all his limbs with rage. She took his weapons from him, she rent his panoply, she silenced his eloquence, she pierced his nets, and an insidious passion crept in on him. She looked so beautiful there, in the fading russet light, with her Greek grace and her ironic pride, and her fettered, untamed, deathless royalty!

"She is a Semiramis! She is a sorceress!" he

muttered in his throat, as he turned and paced the cell a moment, to still the feverish, angered, impatient bitterness rising in him and unnerving him. He felt to her as in the days of the Middle Age men felt to those women whom they sent to the stake for the dangerous sorcery, the white magic, of their too great charms.

She waited there, serene, unmoved, her eyes looking outward at the desolate and barren marshes, her hair slightly pushed back from her brows, the richness and the glitter of her masque dress the sole point of colour in the grey gloom of the cell. She looked like a picture burnt in on the darkness of the naked prison wall.

His glance, licentious and ruthless under the velvet gentleness of his long-studied regard, devoured her loveliness with thirsty, astonished admiration. He had said of her that she had the daring of the Cæsars, but he thought now that she had the intoxication of a Cleopatra. He had heard of her power, he had heard of her witchery, he had heard of the insanity of men who loved her and thought a world well lost for her; he felt and understood the meaning of those stories now. And a proud, eager, cruel light dawned on his face. "*Altro!*" he murmured to himself, with the mocking smile of his full

lips. What mattered it—her defiance, her beauty? She was his captive! Nominally the king's captive, virtually his. What mattered resistance?

He paused before her, subduing the glow of his thoughts beneath the fall of his silken lashes, long and soft as the lashes of women; and his voice had its sweetest melody.

"Madame de Vassalis, hear me. You have said justly you are a prisoner; in the power of a sovereign you have conspired against, of a government you have sought to undermine. To underrate your sway for rebellion and for evil would be absurd; it has been vast, and wrought by the surest spells that subjugate the heart and the soul of man——"

Her delicate, merciless smile arrested the words on his lips.

"What do *you* know of those spells, holy father?"

Though her life was in this man's power, to use as he would, she could not restrain the irony that gave her, the captive, so keen a weapon against her tyrant. A smile for which she could have killed him gleamed under his drooped lids.

"Had I never known them until now, this moment had sufficed to teach them!"

A haughty impatience swept over Idalia's face.

"Sir! I have had my surfeit of such compliments.

From a priest I may surely look for immunity from their weariness."

The tiger-glitter glistened more darkly in his soft brown veiled eyes. How could he deal with this woman? Menace had no terror for her, homage no charm! Unconsciously his voice hardened and grew more imperious; she was the first who had ever braved or baffled him.

"Madame," he pursued, disregarding her words, "you know that you are liable to the full rigour of the law?"

"I know that I am in the power of those who never failed to use that rigour with or without right!"

"The church cannot err," he said, with the certain fiery majesty which, tyrannous and blind in its own belief of infallibility as it was, was yet the truest and greatest thing in him. "You fall within the pale of its most severe justice; yet the church, as you know well, will not deal with you; your sins will be left to the Secular Arm. Your wealth will be confiscated, your power crushed, your life passed in a felon's cell. You must know this."

"My wealth cannot be confiscated," she answered, negligently, "for there is none of it lodged in Italy; you could scarcely imagine me so incautious! That

you will give me no liberty while I have life I perfectly understand, and that King Francis and the Pontifical States alike treat the love of freedom and of justice as a convict's crime, all Europe is well aware. If you allude to my riches, imagining that I will purchase my safety, you err; I will not swell a tyrant's treasuries to gain a personal indulgence."

Rage, hot and lowering, flushed Giulio Villaflor's brow as he heard; yet something of that unwilling homage which had been wrung from him when he had said, "She has the daring of the Cæsars!" was wrested from him now in an admiration that was half amaze, half intolerance; wholly sudden and very ferocious passion was controlled beneath the suave mellow hypocrisies which by long usage had become to him as second nature.

"Madame," he said, with a wave of his long delicate hand, "there are enormities and conspiracies of such magnitude that the wealth of the world could not purchase condonation or escape for them. Those of the Countess Idalia must be expiated; they cannot buy absolution either from the church she has blasphemed or the throne she has shaken. Captivity awaits you—captivity till death. Has it no terrors for you—for *you*, in your beauty,

your youth, your magnificence, your reign of love and of pleasure ? "

She looked him full in the eyes :—

"Monsignore, you use strange language for a priest. Whatever my fate be, I merit it; not for the things which you quote against me as crime, but for luring to their graves the lives you and your murderers slew last night."

The nerves of his cheeks quivered with agitated wrath; not for his bishopric would he have had it known that he had looked on at the slaughter, and given the death-word at the Villa Antina. She laughed, in the aching bitterness of her heart, and in her dauntless scorn for the foes who had netted her in like a wired bird.

"Ah, that was a noble exploit, *beau sire;* a gentle and holy duty of an anointed of Christ! The cross has led the van of the slaughterers of life and of liberty many a time; you but followed the mission of priests in all ages,—to sow broadcast war and desolation, and to pile dead bodies by fire or by steel for the glory of God in the mission of peace! Go and kneel with Viana's blood on your head!—go and fill the throne of St. Peter with the murder of patriots heavy on your soul! Go—you have done no more than the men of

your office have ever done since Hypatia was slain by Cecil, and the early Christians tore and fought for rivalry in Alexandria, and Rome, and Byzantium!"

The light of the sun had died out, there was only the silvery gleam of a lamp which Giulio Villaflor had brought in in his hand, and set down on the narrow stone table; in the mingled radiance and shadow she stood before the omnipotent churchman, in whose hands her destiny was held, as though she were a feudal monarch who lashed a disobedient vassal with her displeasure and disdain. He stood, doubting his own senses; he, the superb priest, he who aspired to the triple tiara, he the friend of emperors and the ruler of palace consciences, to be arraigned by a revolutionist, by an adventuress, whom his will could consign to the Vicaria, to linger there for life! He was convulsed scarce less with amaze than with wrath; and yet through all something of homage was wrung to the majestic courage which thus defied him.

"*Per fede!*" cried the prelate, the fury and the amazement in him breaking through the ever-impenetrable masking of his dulcet graciousness. "*Per fede!* you are bold indeed!"

"I leave cowardice to ecclesiastics, who net brave

men like foxes, and who menace a captive when she can no longer revenge!"

A flush of shame and irritation came on his cheek; he was intolerant, cruel, cunning, an intriguer, a liar, a man of unscrupulous ambition, of intense and overweening pride and vanity; but he was withal a gentleman, and he felt the sting of the rebuke.

"I came—not to menace, but to persuade," he said, restraining the ardour she had roused in him, and bending on her the full lustre of his soft eyes. "My daughter, you cannot suppose but that it is with the utmost repugnance, and only at the last extremity, that force will be resorted to by those you have so justly incensed against you. Your years, your sex, your brilliance, all render the task of chastisement, the exercise of severity towards you, a most painful duty."

She smiled.

"Neither royalty nor priesthood are likely to suffer much from compunction; and as for the things you name, I take no refuge in the shield of my sex's weakness. I believe few men have merited your hatred and your rigour, or the vengeance of any tyranny, more than I have done."

Again she broke his patience, again she rent aside

the courteous, polished suavity which never until now had failed him.

"You speak idly," he said, with a jarring anger and insolence in his voice. "You toy with words you know not the meaning of; you little dream what our 'rigour,' what our 'vengeance' can be to those who brave us!"

Her eyes rested calmly and contemptuously on his:—

"Do I not? When my best-beloved friend Virginia von Evon was scourged in the streets of Pesth because she would not yield up a Hungarian 'rebel' who had trusted his life to her keeping; when Pauline Lasla perished under the ice and the irons of Siberia because she had carried despatches for a Polish liberator; when the Countess Rossellio, at eighty years of age, was thrown into a dungeon by your order because she had lost her two noble sons in the cause of her Italy; when the wife of Manuel Canaro was shot down before his eyes by the soldiers of the Pope for no sin save that of loving liberty and him too well; when I have seen those and a score more martyrs like them, do you think I know nothing of how your hierarchy and your monarchy can revenge themselves on women? It is you, Monsignore, who speak idly; I am well aware that

you will essay captivity first, and if that do not break me into betraying my friends to you and assigning you my wealth, why, then, that you will try —torture! It may be as well to spare you the probation, and to let you know that, though you have fettered me, you have not vanquished me, and never will. Others have died silent, and so can I."

The words were spoken tranquilly, with no haste, with no excitement in them; only beneath their repose of utterance was that fine, keen infliction of scorn, that proud, unyielding patience of resolve, which goaded and incensed him as no torrent of reproaches or of lamentations could have done. And yet, even in his wrath, even in his amaze, even in his outraged majesty as priest and autocrat, he could not but yield her admiration—admiration that stung and fanned the passion in him to fire. He stood before her, as a Papal Legate might have stood before an Empress who defied his mission and the might of Rome, rather than as before a helpless and rebel captive.

"True!" he said, with that grandeur of dominance which made the iron priests of a dead age the scourge and terror of empires. "True! the church must cut off and root up, even with steel and flame, the unworthy and the accursed who deny her supre-

macy. Pity can have no place where *her* holiness is menaced, where her kingdom is denied, where her reign is outraged. True!—even your sex cannot spare you from the chastening that she must, in the fulness of her divine love, bestow on you for the purification of your heresies and your rebellion——"

She stayed him with a gesture:—

"Nay, Monsignore! we are not in the Cinque Cento, and you cannot burn me, though you can slay me more slowly and more cruelly, perhaps. A truce to this melodrame! We are both of the world; let us speak without tragedy. You say the Secular Arm will deal with me for my 'crimes,' why then are you here?"

The direct question staggered him slightly, but Giulio Villaflor was very rarely at fault; he bowed with grace.

"Because I would fain save you, were it possible, from the fruits of your own misguided recklessness."

"I thought so," she said, calmly, while his eyes fell beneath her smile. "I have said, I betray no one; and I give no bribes."

"In gold—no. And I seek none."

He leaned nearer to her, and his voice sank very low; the flush burnt darker in his olive cheek, and his eyes gazed on her beauty with a boldness that

gleamed out under their veiled and velvet softness with a tiger-like ferocity, that those knew well as their death-doom who dared cross the will of Monsignore.

"In gold—no!" she echoed. "You seek my political secrets. Well, you will never have them."

"What!" His voice was very low still, and vibrated with the intensity of restrained passion through the silence of the cell. "You will renounce your pomp, your wealth, your pleasures, your ambitions, your freedom, for the toil of a convict, the chains of a felon, the solitude of a dungeon, the slow, festering, hopeless, endless existence of a prisoner whom no power can release save the warrant of death!"

Her face was still, set, colourless as marble, and as firm:—

"Yes, if liberty be only to be bought by the shame of treachery."

He looked at her, forced out of himself, as it were, by the tribute she wrung from him:—

"Mother of God! What a man you would have been!—you would have ruled the world."

She smiled with a disdainful weariness.

"Who knows? I might have been a court eccle-

siastic, and sold my soul for power to a sacerdotal lie!"

The satire pierced him to the quick, and all the darker and more cruel impulses returned on him. He stooped and laid his hand, with the amethyst ring that glittered like a basilisk's eyes, down upon hers; his voice stole very low on her ear.

"Idalia! women of your beauty can bribe more potently than by gold or state-lore. You shall buy your freedom if you will—from me."

She understood him; the blood flashed back into the colourless weariness of her face; she flung his touch off as though it had pollution; she faced him there in the dimness of the lamp-light with a look in her eyes before which he, all fearless, steeled, and omnipotent though he was, cowed like a lashed hound. Even Giulio Villaflor lacked the boldness which should dare twice tempt her with that alternative to purchase back her liberty.

"Monsignore," she said, briefly, and each word cut like ice, "if I refuse to be a traitress, I shall scarce consent to be your mistress. It were a poor choice of dishonour!"

He could have killed her in her haughty beauty, in her unsparing answer that laid bare the shame

and evil of his own heart, that spoke out so mercilessly the meaning of his veiled words, of his hinted tempting! She had dared him, she had refused him, she had unmasked him—well, she should know of what fashion was the vengeance of Neapolitan blood, of ecclesiastical dominion! He bent to her, his lips close to her hair, his eyes looking into hers, his brown smooth cheek darkly stained with the purple flush of passions which nothing but that calm scorn of her fixed gaze, which never left him, which never drooped beneath the fierce menace of his own, held in any check.

"Madame de Vassalis, you might have given your beauty for your freedom and your wealth; you have refused. So be it! It is in my power without terms or concession. You might have reigned my mistress. You shall be now, instead, my toy for an hour, and languish, later, till the grave, in the king's prisons or the galley's shame. You were unwise, my brilliant revolutionist, to make a foe of me; you are *mine*, body and soul, in life and in death—mine to take when I will, to give where I choose!"

And, with these words, he flung his violet robe closer about him, and, without a glance at her where she stood, swept across the stone floor of the con-

vent cell and left her presence; his keen ear had heard the footfall of a monk without.

"I come, my son—I come!" he said, gently, in his sweet lingering voice. "The captive is contumacious still, but, with discipline and persuasion, she may still be reclaimed to the august faith. Draw the bolts well—so! so!—and deal gently with her; she will see her error."

Alone, where the silver lamp shed its lambent flickering light, Idalia thrust her hand within the folds of the rich scarlet and weighty broideries and sweeping lace of the masquerade dress she still wore, and drew half out from its resting-place in her bosom a delicate gold-sheathed Venetian stiletto, a jewel-studded toy slung by a chain round her throat. She looked at the slender, glittering, lithe blade, and smiled as she put it back.

"*His!*—while that steel will release me the moment his lips dare touch mine!"

For she had in her the temper of Lucretia.

CHAPTER X.

"RIEN QUE TOI."

IN the warm light of the summer morning the yacht steamed her way once more into the harbour of Capri. The Venetians were safe, and Erceldoune returned—to suffer, as he knew, and suffer hopelessly, yet no more able to hold himself back from it than the mariners were able to turn their prows from the magic music of yonder Siren Isles. Groups of fisher-folk were talking together gravely, and with an unwonted sadness on their ruddy, sunburnt faces; as he waded through the knee-deep surf he noticed it—his thoughts leapt to her in an instant—he asked the sailor nearest him what ailed them. The sailor was the man whose brother he had once rescued from the churning seas below Tiberio.

"It is the Comtessa Idalia, Signore."

"What of her?"

"They have arrested her!"

"Arrested her?"

He staggered against the brown timbers of a boat resting on the sands, and clenched them hard to keep himself from reeling like a drunken man. For the moment, old usage in many countries gave the word no meaning on his ear save in its criminal sense.

"So they say, Signore," answered the sailor, while his strong teeth set. "If I had been there, they should not have touched the hem of her skirts! It was done at the Villa Antina, in the interior; the soldiers shot many, I've been told."

"Many! Who?"

"Conspirators, Signore—so they say," replied the Capriote, who scarcely knew the meaning of the phrase, and thought the world governed to perfection if it proved a good fishing-season, and many visitors came to the coast. "Some tell that his Highness of Viana was killed. I don't know about that; but Miladi Idalia is a prisoner of the King's."

With an oath, mighty as ever rang over the marches from the fierce lips of Bothwell, Erceldoune strode from him well-nigh ere the words were ended, and plunged down into the thicket of vegetation that led to the beetling cliff on which her

villa stood. The sun was scorching, the ascent on the slope that faced the sea perilous to life and limb; there was no more than a perpendicular granite slab towering many feet above the water, covered with foliage and rock-flowers. But he was a trained mountaineer; he knew the ice-slope of the Alps as well as he knew the Border-land; he was up it with the swiftness of thought, swinging himself in mid-air from the tough coils of the tangled creepers till he reached the summit, and forced his way, without pause or ceremonial, into the court of the forsaken dwelling.

"No one passes!"

A soldier on guard stood within the arched entrance. Then he knew that it was true, and that she was lost to him, lost to the fangs of the Church, to the dungeons of the Bourbons.

"By whose order are you here?"

The words were hoarse and faint; he felt his lips parched with a dry white heat.

"The order of the King."

"The King's! Stand off!" cried Erceldoune, as though the very name of her tyrant maddened him. "What right have you, for all the despots who curse Europe, to invade her privacy, to violate her home?"

The sentinel said nothing, but lowered his bayonet till the blade was levelled against the intruder's breast. At that instant the deep howl of the hound moaned down the silence. Erceldoune shook with rage as he heard it. Was not her dumb beast even spared! He wrenched the weapon by the gun-barrel from the soldier's hand, flung himself on the slight frail form of the Neapolitan, and, tossing him aside lightly as a broken bough, dashed across the court to where the dog was chained. It was the work of a second to unloose and free him. Ere even that was wholly done, however, the three soldiers left on guard of the villa, which had been rifled by governmental order of all papers, plate, jewels, and articles of value, roused by their comrade's cry, poured into the square court, and levelled their bayonets at him.

"Stir, and you are a dead man!" said the corporal in command.

A laugh was the only answer Erceldoune gave. His blood was up, and in his misery and his fiery rage he cared nothing, and almost knew nothing, of what he did or said.

"At them, Sulla!" he cried in Servian, lifting his hand.

With a bound the giant hound sprang on the

soldier of Francis, and hurled him down as if he had been a dead boar. Erceldoune, with the single blow of his left hand, levelled another to the ground, and before the last sentinel could take aim or raise his fallen fellows, he sprang through the gateway, and, with the dog at his side, dashed headlong through the gardens and down the mountain road, without pause, without heed, well-nigh without sense.

The glow and colour of the world of summer blossom, the fragrant stillness of the morning, the swinging of matin-bells from a chapel far above, the golden fruit that he tossed aside or trampled out as he rushed down the steep incline, all seemed dizzy, unreal, intangible; only one remembrance stood out clear before him—she needed him. He felt giddy and blind, a sickening oppression was on him, the intense odours of the myrtle and orange-flowers were intolerable to him; he felt maddened and senseless with pain; but he was not a man to yield to misery or dread while action was possible, while daring and skill could avail aught. Fire burned in his eyes, his lips shook, his teeth clenched like a vice; he grasped the wolf-hound's mighty mane in a gesture that Sulla understood as though volumes had been said in it.

"We will save her—or kill *them*."

The dog seemed instinctively to know that in his liberator was the avenger of his mistress. He accepted the lead, and followed passively.

Repeated peril and dangerous emergencies, often met and vanquished by himself alone, had given Erceldoune the energetic vigilance, the knowledge and the patience of a soldier; his own nature was rash, impulsive, and hotly impetuous, but the habit of long and arduous service had taught him the value of coolness and of self-restraint. His passions and his fiery chivalry of temper could have led him now to any madness, could have led him to seek out Francis in his own palace, and strike him down before all his nobles and all his guards, as her tyrant and her abductor. He had the blood in him of Border chiefs who had fought for Mary Stuart, and Scottish soldiers who had served with Gordon's archers, of haughty Castilians who had died for a point of honour, and steel-clad Spaniards who had conquered with the Great Captain; and a vein of the old dauntless, reckless, fearless, romantic knight-errantry of a dead day was in him, little as he had known it. His rival had not erred when he said that the "Border Eagle" should have lived in the Crusades. But not the less did he know now that discretion and

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too, for the fisher Nicolò was as grateful for the saving of it as though he had been crowned with gold.

"You will do a thing for me, Colò?" asked Erceldoune, as he arrested the torrent of gratitude.

"I will risk body and soul for you, Signor!"

"I believe you would. I only want you to sell me a fishing-suit such as you wear, and some of your fishing-nets and lines."

"I will *sell* you nothing, 'Lustrissimo," said the sailor, doggedly, and with a certain wounded pride. "I will give you everything my poor hut holds."

"And I will take it as willingly. Forgive me for using the word of barter!"

The Capriote's eyes beamed with delight at the concession and the comprehension.

"Come within, Eccellenza."

Erceldoune bent his lofty head, and entered the low, square, sea-scented hut, with the half-naked children, handsome as young seraphs running wild, and the yellow gourds, and dried herbs, and onion-ropes hanging from the rafters. As it chanced, there was a suit, unworn except on saints' days, and of full size, for the marinaro was of high stature and powerfully built. In a few moments his own white yachting-dress was changed for it; he set the scarlet-

tasseled cap on his head, wore nothing over the loose striped shirt that left his arms so free, and flung some nets over his shoulders. With the bronze hue of his skin and the sweeping darkness of his beard, no casual glance would have detected him to be other than a Capriote.

"Shall I pass as a marinaro?" he asked the sailor.

Nicolò smiled.

"You look more like a king in disguise."

"I am sorry for it. Now, while I wait here, will you pull out to the yacht, give the captain this ring from me as credentials, and bid him send me, by you, all the gold and circular-notes I have on board, my pistol-case, powder-flask, cartridge-case and shot-belt, and a pocket-flask of brandy? Say nothing of my disguise, and be as quick as you can, for God's sake."

The Capriote obeyed, got his little boat out rapidly, and pushed off from the shore with hearty good will. Erceldoune sat at the hut door with the hound crouched at his feet, and his eyes fixed on the waste of waters. All the glories of the bay were spread before him, but it might have been a sand-desert for aught that he knew or saw; the fishing-skiff flew light and swift as a bird over the sea, but to

him it seemed scarcely to move; every moment was a pang, every minute appeared eternity. While he waited here in the noontide glare, how might she not be tortured!—while the hours flew on, how might not her foes be wringing her proud heart! Time was passing so fast: three days, they said, had gone by since the arrest at Antina; Heaven only knew how many leagues she might have been borne since then, to what remote inaccessible recesses of Alps or Apennines, monastic prison, or mountain-shut morass, she might have been taken ere now! The fever of an intolerable agony possessed him. While he was in action he could bear it; it was something at least to be in search for her, to be in her service, to be on her track; but to sit here while those eternal matins tolled the passing seconds away, and the fishing-boat seemed to glide snail-like over the width of the sea! The swinging monotone of the chapel bell, the measured dips of the oars, seemed to beat into his brain and drive him senseless. What was it to him that she had told him his passion was hopeless? If he could give her back her freedom and her happiness, he felt that he could die in peace.

Nicolò returned very rapidly, laggard as the time

had appeared, bringing all for which he had been sent. The money was the whole, or very nearly, of his three months' pay just drawn—some two hundred pounds or less of circular-notes in a chamois-leather pouch. He left, unseen, several gold pieces of it in a wooden bowl from which the fisherman was used to drink his onion-soup, then slipped the pistols in his sash and the pouch in his shirt, and turned again to Nicolò.

"Now take me across, some way off Naples if you can, and let mé land unnoticed in the nearest route for Antina."

The marinaro, with all the alacrity of his craft, had ready his sailing-boat, a small lugger, awkward but seaworthy, in very little time, and, with his eldest son at the helm, pushed off once more into deep water. Erceldoune sat silent and deep in thought, the hound at his feet, couched on the bottom of the vessel, watching him ever with deep, keen, mournful eyes. The day was beautifully still; the bay alive with innumerable craft, and gay with sails of tawny stripes and flags of all nations' hues. Naples lay white and matchless in her sunlit grace; he saw no more of the glory about him than though he were blind. He thought they sailed slowly as a death-barge; in truth, the lugger danced over the light

curled waves and through the snowy surf as brightly as a monacco on the wing.

Nicolò knew every inch of the coast, and landed at length in a small lonely creek, hidden in profuse vegetation, where there was just depth enough to steer the vessel in, and let the beach be reached by wading.

"Yonder lies Antina, Signor," said the fisherman; "a league to the left by that road where the cypresses are. You see?"

Erceldoune took the man's brown hand in his and wrung it hard.

"I see! I cannot thank you now, Nicolò. Later on, if I live——"

The Capriote fixed his large black eyes tenderly and wistfully on him.

"Eccellenza, you go into some danger. Let me be with you."

Erceldoune shook his head.

"Why not, Signor?" pleaded Nicolò, entreatingly. "When *I* was in peril you came to me, down into the churning seas, at risk of your own life. The boy can take the boat back. Let me come!"

Erceldoune put him gently back.

"Not now, Colò, though I could wish for no

better comrade. But what I do, I must do alone."

He broke from the man's entreaties and conjurations, and went up through the tangled thickets of arbutus and through the fields of millet rapidly, and never looking back; every moment was so precious. The fisherman stood watching him sadly.

"It is *she*," he said. "It is so with them all! She is a sorceress. I am glad I crossed myself whenever I met her, though old Bice calls her an angel, because she promised Fanciulla a dower. I am glad I crossed myself!"

A league brought him to Antina—a league that lay through olive-grounds, and green fields of maize, and vineyards, and sunburnt grass-land, which his slashing stride, that was the walk of the mountaineer, covered rapidly. To anything like fatigue he was insensible. Since the hour when she had found him in the pine-woods his life had been spent in one vain pursuit—the search for Idalia; yet never had he sought her as he sought her now.

He passed into the villa grounds: nearer the building he dared not venture; it would be occupied, in all likelihood, also by soldiers, and the sight of a fisherman loitering so far inland would of itself excite suspicion. But towards the entrance

the hound paused, tore the earth up in mad haste, snuffed the ground, ran round and round again, threw his head in the air, then gave a deep-mouthed bay of joy, and looked back for a sign to Erceldoune. He stooped and laid his hand on the dog's mane; his own heart was beating so thickly that he felt sick and reeling; here his one hope had centred —that Sulla would find her trail.

"Seek her," he said, simply.

The hound needed no other command; with his muzzle to the earth he tore it up by handfuls, searching hither and thither; then settled to his work as the pack settle to line-hunting, and dashed off—not inward towards the gardens, but out to the open country. Stooping an instant ere he followed him, Erceldoune, whose eye and ear were well-nigh as trained as an Indian's, for they were those of one of the first deer-stalkers of Scotland, saw the mark of wheels, very faint on the parched arid turf that was dry and bare as bone, but still there. Hope rose in him;—if he were not too late!

Onward he went in the burning sun-glare, with the weight of the nets on his shoulder, and the heat pouring down into the scarlet wool of the fishing-cap; onward, where the dog led through the long heat of the day, through the shades of evening,

through the stilly starlight, as one succeeded the other. It was tedious, arduous, wearying work; bringing so little recompense, needing such endless patience. Often the hound lost scent, and had to try back to where he had lost the sign of the wheels, as though it were the slot of a stag; often the dry crisp grasses or the baked white dust of the roads bore no scent at all, or the crossing and recrossing of other tracks blurred the marks and confused the trail; often the impress of a mule's hoofs or the heavy footprint of a contadina had struck out or overlaid the faint traces which only guided the dog. Often, also, for a priest, or a peasant party going to an *infiorata*, or, worse yet, for a set of soldiers scouring the country, he had to seek shelter in some dank dell of woodland, on some sandy pine-knoll, under the grey twisted olives, or beneath a tumble-down shed, and hide, as though he were himself the prisoner hunted, forcing Sulla to lie still beside him. But he had spent many a long day in the patient toil of deer-stalking in the Highlands at home, and he brought the same wariness and the same long endurance here. If he had once abandoned himself to the misery of thought, to the fierceness of vengeance, he could never have borne the intolerable slow-dragging bitterness of this end-

less search; but he would not give way to them. and he would not let them urge him into the madness which could have made him dash down into Naples and demand her at the hands of the Bourbon. He knew that if it were possible to save her, thus only could it be done; and he gave himself to the toil without pause, and with a self-restraint that cost him more than all.

Three days and three nights were spent thus; he began to think in his agony that he should only find her—if ever he found her—dead. His search was chiefly made after the sun was down; the day, when he had not to secrete himself and the hound from those who might have thought their aspect suspicious, and from village authorities who might have challenged his appearance away from a seaport, he spent in questioning the country people, as far as he could, without exciting wonder or counter-inquiry. Happily he could speak the Neapolitan patois to a miracle, and he supported his character of a fisherman well enough with most; some thought, like Nicolò, that he looked more like a prince in disguise, but he was frank and comrade-like with them, drank with them, ate their own coarse food, could give them a hand in mending their roof after a storm, in digging a trench round their

olives, or in reaping their maize, and lived so like one of themselves, that he soon conciliated them, and persuaded them that he was a paid-off mariner who had sailed to far distant places, and liked now to wander at will over the country.

From them he gleaned various news; nothing that told him, however, the one great thing— where Idalia had been taken. When the sun set each day, and he was free from observation, he put Sulla on the track again from the spot where they had last left it, and worked on the line unwearyingly through the nights. The hound had been perfectly trained, and understood what was needed of him to a marvel; he had attached himself to Erceldoune with a strange sagacity of instinct, seeming to lay aside the jealousy he had hitherto shown him for sake of their mutual love and service to the one both had lost. Such sleep as he was obliged to take he took in the hottest hours of the day under the screen of millet-sheaves, or in the cool shade of deep ravines filled with chestnuts or cypresses; with the fall of evening he resumed the search, and through the clear lambent light of the Italian moon, or in the gloom of frowning hills and woods, the two shadows of the man and dog glided unceasingly, bending down and seeking hither and

thither. Some who saw them crossed themselves, and took them for the shades of some ghastly huntsman and his phantom hound; others, more practical, took them for truffle-seekers, despite the gigantic size of the animal. Not one ever ventured to stop them; a rough muleteer once tried a parley in the midnight on a lonely hill-side path, and said something, with a menace, of his fancy for the brandy-flask, whose silver head he saw under the folds of the waist-sash; but a blow with the butt-end of one of the pistols soon silenced him by levelling him with the brown-burnt moss, and Erceldoune was molested no more. Slowly—very slowly—and with an infinite toil and patience, he worked his way by the guidance of the hound's lead, till the dawn of the fourth day brought him into the rugged, desolate, morass-intersected country, where, dark and sullen above the miasma-haunted lake at its foot, the square castellated building of the isolated monastery stood among its stunted trees, with the bare grey cliff towering at its back. It was a red, stormy, misty, oppressive morning, very hot and poisonous in its heat as the steam rose up from the black still waters and the wastes of swamp, while beyond stretched the grey of the monotonous olive and the still more distant

black peaks of cypress-topped hills, as the hollow booming matin-bell of the monks swung wearily through the heavy air. "There is no fortress here; is the dog in error?" he thought, as he entered on the dreary desert of the level marshy land, with no sound in it except the echo of the tolling bell and the noise of the moor-fowls startled from their rest among the reeds and sedges. But the hound held on, growing keener and hotter as the scent grew stronger and the wheel marks plainer in the damp sodden ground than they had been on the dusty roads and the traversed highways. With his muzzle to the ground, he dashed onward mile on mile across the country at a speed that taxed the Border fleetness of his companion. There were quagmires, morasses, hidden pools, sponges of mud, small lagunes hidden under treacherous grasses or rushes, unseen pools where the water-birds brooded by hundreds, swamps where a single false step would be death for any sinker under the yielding, soaking, nauseous mass; but the hound never missed his footing or erred in his going, and Erceldoune followed him through the grey of the morning; his heart beat to suffocation, the brown lonely waste reeled before his eyes, the hot noxious air seemed to weigh down his breath

and stifle him, but a delirium of hope came on him;—the dog must be near at last! Straight in his level chase, straight as though he were running down a stag across an open plateau, fleet as the wind, and with his mighty crest bristling and his eyeballs red with flame, Sulla led on, across the marshes, across the shallow ponds, over the trembling mass of water-sodden earth, through the steaming vapour rising from the lakes—led on till he stood under the broken granite crags on which the monastery was raised above the still, black, reedy surface of the lake.

Then, with one rolling bay like thunder, he woke all the echoes of the lonely silent dawn. Afar from on high, through the gloom of an arched casement, through the swaying flicker of dank leaves, through the transverse lines of iron bars, eyes dark as night, weary as pain, looked down on him;—they were the eyes of Idalia.

She sat in the monastic cell which was her prison-chamber, with the bare hot glare of the sunlight, that burnt all nature black and barren, and made the disease-laden vapours rise up from the swamps below, scarcely entering through the narrow lancet-chink that was the sole casement of this cold stone

cage, in which they had shut their brilliant-plumaged bird. Her hands rested on the slab of granite that was her only table; links of steel held the wrists together: they had allowed her no change of raiment, and the lustrous colours and gold broideries of the masque dress still swept the damp flags of the floor, though all jewels had been taken from her. She had been here six days and six nights a captive of the Bourbons; what was yet worse, a captive of the Church.

Food of the coarsest and the scantiest was all that had been allotted her, and once—"for contumacy," — her priestly gaolers' hands had been stretched to tear down the silks and lace from her shoulders, and bruise and lacerate them with the scourge,—once, when the dignity that they were about to outrage so foully had made the monk, who was bidden to the office, drop the lash, aghast and trembling, and his superior, who had directed the infamy, feel too much shame in the moment to hound him on to his work. They had desisted for twenty-four hours more. "By then," they had muttered, "the rebellious subject might have broken her silence, and become less obdurate to the due demands of Church and King."

The twenty-four hours had well nigh gone by, but

Idalia had given no sign of yielding; she had scarcely spoken since the day that Giulio Villaflor had quitted her presence. She knew that the lightest word might be construed into confession, or used as evidence against those whom they wanted her to betray; and she had strength in her to endure torture unflinchingly, without breathing one syllable that should sound as an entreaty for mercy, or be translated into a hint against her comrades in adversity. She knew well what she had to anticipate; she did not seek to palliate to her own thoughts the horror of the doom that awaited her; she knew that only by death, self-dealt, could she escape the passion of the libertine who held her in his gripe; she knew that when that had had its way, and grown sated of its own violence, she would, if she lived, drag out existence in agony, in shame, in felon companionship, in hopeless bondage; she never veiled from herself the depth and the despair of the wretchedness that awaited her, and she knew that not even her sex would shelter her from the barbarity of physical torture, till that torture should kill her bodily strength, or her persecutors learn that it was powerless to destroy her resolve and break her silence. She knew the fate that awaited her, but never for one instant did the thought glance

by her that she could purchase freedom from it all by betraying those whose lives she held in her keeping, or by going willingly to the loathed love of her ecclesiastical captor. Such weakness as that was not possible to her nature; she had a virile courage, a masculine reading of all bonds of honour; this woman, bred in luxury, in self-indulgence, in power, in patrician tastes, and epicurean habits, had the nerve in her to endure all things, rather than to purchase her redemption by a traitor's recreancy.

She had been successful hitherto in concealing from her gaoler the slender shaft of the stiletto, and she was prepared in extremity to use it; she had too much of the old Greek heroism to fear such a death, and had too many of the old, dauntless, pagan creeds not to hold its resource far nobler than a long dishonoured life of endless misery.

Where she leaned now, with her chained hands lying on the stone, and the darkness and the silence of the stone cell about her, her face was colourless, but it had on it no fear, no weakness: it was only grave, and very weary. Her thoughts had gone to many scenes and memories of her past—the past which, in eight brief years of sovereignty, had been fuller and more richly coloured than a thousand drawn-out lives that never change their grey still

calm from the cradle to the grave. Endless hours of those dead years rose before her to haunt her in this black solitude, in these chill iron-bound walls, in which the magnificence of her life had ended—hours in the lustrous glare of Eastern suns, under the curled leaves of palm, and the marble domes of ruined temples; in the laughing riot of Florentine nights, when the carnival-folly reeled flower-crowned adown the banks of Arno; in the gaslit radiance of Paris, when the fêtes of the Regency revived for her; in summer evenings in Sicilian air, when the low chants echoed softly over Mediterranean waters, and the felucca, flower-laden, glided through the starlight to music and to laughter; in palaces of Rome, of Vienna, of Prague, of Venice, where the dawn found the banqueters still at their revels, and no wines that flushed purple and gold in the blaze of the lights and the odours of perfume intoxicated the drinkers like the glance of her eyes, like the spell of her smile—all these scenes rose up above her, and filled with the hues of their life and their splendour the barren, bitter, stone-locked loneliness in which she was immured. She had loved her reign; she had loved her sceptre; she had loved those years so crowded with triumphs, with pleasures, with mirth, with wit, with radiance, with

homage, with peril that only lent them keener zest, richer flavour; she had loved them, though beneath the purple, fetters had held her, and amidst her insouciance remorse had pursued her; she had loved them—and they were dead for ever. She was chained here a prisoner of captors who never spared until their brother-tyrant, Death, claimed their spoil and their prey at their hands.

"It is just—only just," she thought, while her head leaned on the cold steel clasping her wrist, and the black moisture-dripping blocks of the cell enclosed her as though already she were in her grave. "I sent them to their graves; it is only just that I should have a felon's doom."

A shiver ran through her like a shiver of intense cold, though the close air of the cell was oppressive and scorching! It was not for her own life, but for the lives that had fallen around her, like wheat beneath the sickle in the banqueting-halls of Antina.

The silence was unbroken; one burning ray of the outer sun stole though the loophole and flashed on the gyves enclosing the hand, whose lightest touch had thrilled men's veins like fire and impelled them where it would; the dank, noiseless, grey gloom was like the gloom of a charnel-house.

Suddenly on that stillness broke the challenge of the hound's bay.

Idalia started; she knew the familiar sound that rolled out like the roll of a clarion. The colour flushed her face, she moved rapidly to the casement; through the glare of the sun, beneath the shelving precipice of rock, she saw the dog, and saw who was his comrade.

She knew him in the first moment that his longing eyes looked upward, and knew his errand there —knew that he had come to save her, or to die with her.

"O God!—he, too!"

The words escaped her involuntarily where she stood alone, leaning against her prison bars, as the hound shook all the echoes from the rocks around with the impatience of his summons; she had seen so many perish, she would fain have saved this man.

Through the space of the sultry white sun-glare that severed them his eyes met hers, and spoke in that one look all the force of the ardour, all the fidelity of the devotion, that had brought him once more to the woman who, for good or evil, had become the ruler of his life. At that gaze her own eyes filled, her lips trembled; such love had been

oftentimes lavished on her, yet never had it moved her as it moved her now. She had told him that no other thing save misery could come to him through her; she had forbidden him even the baseless solace of hope; she had bade him fear, scorn, hate, flee from her; and nothing had killed his loyalty, nothing had burnt out his passion.

A glow of warmth passed over her; an infinite tenderness made the tears gather in her eyes as she saw this faith against all trial borne to her, this chivalry through every ordeal staunch to her.

"If a straight stroke and a lion heart could deliver me, how soon I should be free!" she thought. "He comes too late—too late!"

Too late; not alone to unloose her bonds and rend her from her gaolers, but too late to wake her heart to his, to find her life unusurped, to be sufficient for her in the lotus-dream of love.

The step of a monk was heard without as one of the brethren passed to fetch water from a well that was built under the shadow of a few cypress-trees some score yards from the convent. She left the barred casement, signing her lover towards the deep shade where the blackness of overhanging rocks made a refuge into which not even the noon-rays could penetrate.

He comprehended and obeyed the gesture to secresy and silence; his heart was beating to suffocation, his blood felt on fire, wretchedness and rapture rioted together in him. He had found her! So much was mercy; but she was in the gripe of those who never spared; she was in the power of those who never unloosed their prey; the battalions of an army could scarce avail to wrench her from the united hate of Bourbon and of Rome. He knew it; he knew that he was but one man against the whole force of a government and a hierarchy, but the Border boldness in him rose the higher for that; the reckless romance of the old Spanish Paladins that slept in his blood awakened as wildly as it ever awakened in the comrades of Campeador or the knights of Ponce de Leon.

"I will deliver her, or die for her!" he swore in his throat: and he had never yet broken an oath.

Forcing the dog to quietude, he drew back from the monastery into the shade of the stunted cypresses, and threw his lines into a lake-like pool that lay at the foot of the rocks; an angler's pursuit went well enough with his *barcarolo's* dress. The water was reedy, yellow, stagnant in places, with islets of river grasses, in which water-fowl herded by

thousands; but the care of the monks, who made their sole repasts from its treasuries, kept it well stocked with fish, and in a brief time he landed both dace and roach, though his strong wrists trembled as they had never done when a Highland salmon had dragged him miles down the length of a moorland river in a wrestling duel that lasted from noon till evening.

The monk, returning with his buckets from the well, saw the sacrilegious raid upon the heaven-dedicated food, and as the angler had relied on, drew near him in wrath and in rebuke.

"Nay, good father," said Erceldoune, lifting the fish to him, "I am an idle fellow; grudge me not a chance of doing a trifle for Holy Church. I am more used, maybe, than your brethren to filling a creel quickly."

"My son, you are welcome to our charity," replied the monk, a little confused at finding a robber offer him so willingly the spoils. "All I meant was, that, of a truth, such varlets and ruffians poach on the waters that we are obliged to guard them something strictly. You have a supple wrist and a marvellous strength; we," added the friar, with a sigh of envy, "angle all day sometimes, and catch nothing."

"Let me fish for you, father," said Erceldoune. His heart throbbed with hope and dread as he preferred a request on which all his future fate would hang; but he had control enough to speak carelessly, and his Neapolitan accent was so perfect that the monk never doubted his country. "Let me fish for you; and give me in recompense a night or two's lodging. I shall be well paid."

"You are poor, my son?"

"Poor enough."

"And a wanderer?"

"I have been a wanderer all my life."

"In truth? You are a fine fellow, and if you really want the Church's alms ——"

The Cistercian hesitated; a monastery could scarce refuse its charity, yet the orders of the superior were strict to treat all strangers with circumspection, and, if possible, to admit none.

"See, here, father," said Erceldoune, rapidly. "I want no man's alms, lay or clerical; but if you like to strike a bargain, here is one. You are not much of sportsmen, I fancy; now I have all that lore by heart. I am a wild *barcarolo*, but I know none could beat me in river-craft or in shooting. You have ospreys and cormorants in these sedges that eat half the fish in the lake; you have wild

swans that would make you savoury messes to sicken you for ever of maize and of lentils; you have shoals of small fresh-water fish that I will snare by thousands in my nets, and, salted, they will last you the whole winter through;—let me work for you on the water, and give me in payment a lodging for myself and my dog. I will warrant you you shall have the best of the bargain."

His voice shook a little with an eagerness he could not repress; the monk, a comely, good-humoured, elderly man from the Umbrian marshes, a poor brother who did servile offices, and was at once porter and angler and hewer of wood and drawer of water for the monastery, felt his eyes glisten and his lips taste savoury things as he thought of the wild swans in a potage, and his own labours lightened by the stalwart arm and the fearless skill of this adventurer. He looked a moment curiously in Erceldoune's face; its frank, bold proud features won his trust instantly, as they won the trust of all who looked on them; he glanced longingly at the fowl-filled sedges.

"Wait a moment, my son. I have no power to grant your request myself, but I will go speak with the almoner, and see what we can do. If the Father Superior will listen to your wish, I shall be glad

enough for one, for Holy Mary knows it is hard work and thankless to find food for seventy hungry mouths and lean stomachs in these barren lands. Wait a second, and I will be back."

He heaved up the water-buckets, and went his way with bent shoulders and plodding steps. Erceldoune stood by the lake-side, with his eyes fastened on the barred loophole whence the eyes of the mistress of his life had looked down on him. He thought he saw the gleam of her hair in the shadow on high; he thought she gazed on him, though for both their sakes she dared not do so openly; he felt his cheek change colour like a woman's; he felt his limbs tremble as with a woman's tremor;—all chance of aid to her, of deliverance for her, rested on this one hazard he had tried of obtaining entrance to the convent that was her prison-house.

It seemed to him an eternity while the monk was absent; anxiety made his eyes blind and his head swim as he saw the brother at last returning;—if his request were denied! if his disguise were penetrated! The first words he heard made him feel giddy with their joy.

"My son, be it as you will," said the monk; "and I pray you kill a swan quickly. The Father

Superior is pleased to grant your prayer; and we will lodge you and give you food, if you will shoot and fish and labour in the marshes, as you have said till our buttery be stocked and our waters be well netted."

Erceldoune bent his head, so that the rush of vivid joy that flushed his face should not betray him.

"I will labour for you, father, night and day if you will," he said, briefly.

Would he not have laboured like a galley-slave through summer drought and winter chills if, by his labour, he could have bought one smile from her or spared her a moment's pang! Then, without more words, he loaded, fired, and brought down a wild swan on the wing. "Fetch it," he said to Sulla; the hound had been bred to retrieve, and the bird in ten seconds was laid at his feet.

"Chee-e-e!" murmured the Benedictine, ruffling the snowy plumage and thinking longingly of the savoury stew that would vary their refectory fare that night, while he stared at the *barcarolo* as at a stranger from some unknown world. "You are a wonderful shot, my friend. If you go on like that, we shall have the best of the bargain, as you said, for you will find but sorry lodgment

with us. Can you sleep on a shake-down of dry grass?"

"I have slept on bare earth and bare decks many a time before now."

"Truly? Yet you look of noble blood?"

"Good blood is scant use if our fortunes be low."

"Ah! You have fallen on evil days?"

"Very evil."

"And you were of proud stock once?"

"Good father, I thought in the eyes of the Church all men were equal."

He spoke curtly, to rid himself of the Cistercian's restless curiosity, and flinging his fishing-shirt open at the breast, he set himself to fixing the stakes and the nets at the head of the great pool. Every sort of wood and water lore had been familiar to him from his earliest boyhood; every secret of the loch and heather he had learnt from the days of childhood. With all the skill and strength that were in him he went to the toil of working for the monastery fare, of reaping such a harvest from the marshes and the sedges and the lakes as should make the brethren give him lodging with favouring cordiality and without questions. He worked like a slave, in the scorch of the Italian sky, conscious

of no fatigue, sensible of no pain; he worked for her, and on him her eyes might rest from her prison-chamber. It gave him a Samson's force, an Indian's patience. Wading knee deep through the pools, he stretched his nets across the head of the water, as he had known the poachers to do many a night across the weir of Highland rivers. Afraid of wasting such powder and shot as he had with him, he made a sling from a strip of his sash, and slew with unerring aim the wild teal that flocked among the osiers, till they were flung in scores to the arid banks. He mowed down the reeds where the fish-destroying birds were sheltered, so that they should haunt the monastery waters no more, and bore the rushes in great sheaves to land. He laboured without rest, and doing the work of twenty men, in the full downpour of the vertical heat, and all through the length of the day, while his friend the Umbrian brother sat luxuriously, with folded hands, staring at him like an owl lazily blinking in the sunlight.

He laboured without ceasing, and with a hot joy at his heart; afar, where the grey walls towered, the eyes of Idalia watched him, and with sunset he would have earned the right to sleep under the roof that made her prison. It sufficed, with his high

[illegible] high courage, to give him almost
[illegible] He could not believe that love like his
[illegible] powerless to defend and to release her.

[illegible] long day he worked unweariedly
[illegible] under the frowning shadow
[illegible] And from her cell
[illegible] bold heroic cast of the
[illegible] brow from which the
[illegible] gazed on him where,
[illegible] through the sere rushes,
[illegible] he toiled as peasants
[illegible] though she had bidden him
[illegible] or ever, though she had
[illegible] could be his portion
[illegible]

[illegible] and silence of her stone-
[illegible] down on him at his labour
[illegible] hours of the southern sum-
[illegible] were heavy with a regret-
[illegible] with a sigh of weari-
[illegible]

[illegible] thought: "Too late!"

[illegible] globe of red flame in an
[illegible] and with it the day's
[illegible] it out of the
[illegible] tempers of the
[illegible]

slothful Brethren gathered in a month. Erceldoune stooped eagerly, and drank long draughts of thin crimson wine out of a half gourd-rind that the Umbrian monk held to him, looking at him the while with a curious, compassionate, wondering, envying glance.

"You are tired, my son? Ah! what limbs, what strength! Come within; you shall sup with us, and have such a dormitory as we can give you. Bring the great beast too, if there be no danger in him; certes, he is a giant like you."

Erceldoune, as he lifted his head from the wine felt his face as flushed as the stormy sunset light that fell on it; a wild, senseless joy was on him—he should be within the walls that held her. He laid his hand on the hound's collar, with a gesture to silence well enough understood by the animal, and followed mutely the brother.

Jagged precipitous flights of steps, rough hewn in the rock itself, led up to the monastery. The entrance-door was a low-browed iron-studded arched barrier of oak, impregnable as granite. It yielded slowly, unwillingly, with a grating jar as the monk pushed it open.

"Enter, my son."

Erceldoune stooped, and passed through it into

the vaulted stone passage-way within, dark as twilight; the door swung weightily back to its place, the great bolts rolled into their sockets, the dying day and the living world were alike shut out. Thus far one desire of his heart had fulfilled itself; he shared her prison-house with Idalia.

"This way, my son," said the Umbrian, as he turned down a tortuous vaulted passage which led to the monks' dormitories, small stone cells one in another, with dried grasses shaken down, as he had said, for pallets, and the moisture dripping from the naked walls. The Cistercians of this place were very poor; and Giulio Villaflor loved vicarious mortification, and was very stringent on his monks' asceticism and devotion, visiting the slightest laxity with a fearful rigour.

The poor brother, at whose girdle hung the huge keys of the ecclesiastical fortress, motioned to one of the little chambers.

"This is yours, my son. I will come to you in half-an-hour. We sup then in the refectory."

Erceldoune, left in solitude, closed his door and drew its massive bolt; then stripping off his clothes, dashed the cold water that stood in a pitcher over him, re-arranged his fisher-dress as best he could, slung the pistols again in his sash,

dropped beside the dog on the hay, and let his head sink on his hands. He was beneath the same roof with her; the knowledge made his heart beat thickly, and his temples throb. But—how to save her?

It would be as dangerous to wrench her from the jaws of the Church as to rend an antelope from a panther's jaws and talons. Yet his teeth ground together under the sweeping darkness of his beard, his hand felt for the butts of his belt-pistols. "I can die with her at least," he thought, "and send some of her foes to damnation first."

His love was too fervent and too true not to be pagan in its longing and his vengeance.

The half-hour soon passed as he sat lost in thought, feverish, tempestuous, conflicting; the Umbrian brother came to him.

"Our supper is ready, my brother; it is richer than common, thanks to your woodcraft and your angling."

Erceldoune followed him, leaving the hound at guard.

A long arched stone corridor led to the refectory, a desolate, dimly-lit hall of the same rough-hewn stone, with a few feeble oil-lamps flickering in the great sea of gloom. The board was simply spread with fried fish and a simmering soup, in which the

wild swan and some of the water-fowls were stewed with lentils and capsicums. Some seventy monks sat round it, breaking black bread, and scenting longingly though with downcast eyes and immutable lips the unwonted savour of the fare. As his ringing step sounded on the stone floor, the recluses looked with a dreary, dull wonder at this man with his superb manhood, with his luxuriant beard, and his stalwart build, and his mountain freedom of glance and of movement, who seemed to bring a draught of wild, strong, fresh, forest-breeze into the darkness and solitude of their prison.

He made his reverence gravely to the white-haired elder whom they pointed out as the Superior, then seated himself at the lower end of the board, and took the food proffered him. Many eyes studied him inquisitively, but no questions were asked; an unbroken silence prevailed as the meal went on. The Order was sternly ruled—sternly in especial when any wayfarer or stranger was present; it had a great fame for sanctity, and that odorous reputation went far to cover any whispers that might steal abroad of other and less holy uses to which its highest director might turn it. "Great Heaven!" thought Erceldoune, as he glanced down the long table at the close-shaven, silent guests that surrounded it, while

his hand went instinctively to the abundant falling masses of the silken hair that covered his chest, "can living, breathing men—men in their youth and their strength—exist like that?"

His thoughts swept over the many varying years of his own life, so full of colour, of peril, of adventure, of change; of wandering in divers lands, of danger in deserts and on seas, of pleasure in countless cities, of world-wide range of travel, of communion with every nation, of gay nights in western palaces, of wild rides through eastern heats;—and then men lived like this, while all the earth was free to them!

He spoke to none of them; he bore them a fiery hate because they were her priestly gaolers, and even so much needful reticence as lay in breaking the bread of these men under a false semblance, while the intent to deliver their captive was hidden in his heart, savoured too much of a taint like treachery not to be bitter to him, imperative as it was in her service, and just as it was in its employ and errand.

To Erceldoune it were far easier to deal a straight swift stroke, such as that with which men of his race had felled Paynim foe or Southern invader, than to carry through anything that involved a

touch of what looked to him like deception. His life had brought him into many critical moments when silence, acuteness, and caution had been as compulsory as hot action and reckless daring; and he had never been found wanting in them. But the rush of a lion, the swoop of an eagle, were more his instinct and his warfare; and he chafed feverishly under this part that he played for her sake in the Italian monastery.

The supper was brief; he had hoped the monks might be, as he had known many, laughter-loving riotous brethren, gossips in their cups, and not averse to heavy libations, from whom he might have gleaned some hint or knowledge of her. They were not; a cold, still, harsh asceticism brooded over them; they were chiefly saturnine, worn, impassive men, whose faces were chill and unreadable as masks of stone; there was nothing to give a suspicion that anything, save the severest form of religious devotion and abstinence, reigned there—nothing to hint that there was a prisoner within their keeping. There was not one from whom he could expect to extract any hope, except the poor porter and water-carrier, on whose round jocund face not even the silence and the hard labour of his life could impress either spirituality or resignation.

The monks filed slowly out of the dark, narrow, vaulted hall; the Umbrian and one other remained to clear away the remnants of the meal.

"Will you take this to your dog?" said the priest, as he heaped up the remnants. "You did well not to bring him here; the Superior would not have loved so big a brute."

"Thanks," said Erceldoune, as he took some broken food; "and do you come to my cell, good father, I have something more cheering in my flask than your water and goat's milk."

The Umbrian's eyes glistened with delight, though a shadow of grievous disappointment stole quickly over his features.

"Another night, my son—to-morrow night I shall be free," he whispered. "This evening I must attend the offices. You know your way back, and you can undress by moonlight? We have no other light, save in the chapel."

Erceldoune, wearily enough, nodded assent, and with a brief word of thanks paced through the long passages to his dormitory. He could do no more; he must wait and watch, and be content that he was near her. He could not tell in what part of the building she was lodged; he must await time to learn that, and learn the means to reach her. With the

morrow he might bribe, or stupify the Umbrian with drink, till he reached his confidence; for the present there was nothing for it, without exciting suspicion, except to remain in the sleeping-place allotted him, and labour afresh for them with the dawn.

The little slit, unglazed and narrow as a hand's breadth, through which the luminous silver moon poured down, was high above his head; he swung himself upward and looked out; the waters and marshy plains, with the dark belt of cypress afar off, slept calmly in the white and glistening night; all was very still, only broken by the cry of a water-bird, the rush of an aziola, or the hoot of an owl. As he gazed, the outer bolt of the stone door of his cell was drawn sharply and swiftly; he dropped to his feet with an oath.

"Do not blaspheme, my son," said the Umbrian's voice through a chink. "It is only our custom with strangers."

He was a prisoner for the whole length of the summer night.

Well—the prison was hers; it was something to share it.

He undressed, laid his pistols ready loaded by his side, drank thirstily of the cool water with which the pitcher had been re-filled, and threw himself on

the dry grasses, with his arm flung round the hound's neck; they were comrades—they were both here to save her.

He lay long gazing at the glimpse of starry sky that gleamed above, while the chimes tolled slowly from the bell-tower of the Benedictine monastery, and the moonlight poured down on to his mighty limbs stretched there in rest, and the gladiator breadth of the vast uncovered chest; only to know that he was beneath the same roof with her through the long silent hours, made his brain giddy, his heart on fire.

It was very long before at length a fitful, restless, dreamy sleep came to him.

CHAPTER XI.

LION AND LEOPARD.

WITH the first break of the dawn, freed by his Umbrian friend, he went back to his work on the waters; the cool long hours were precious for labour, and he desired so to gratify and serve them, that the Brethren should be loth to lose his services. He was thankful that he was given liberty at all with the sunrise. When the bolt of his cell had been drawn, a horror of dread had stolen on him that his errand was suspected, and that he was trapped, like a fox in a keeper's gins.

The morning was balmy, clear, and beautiful; even the naked wastes and smoking marshes looked brighter in its light, and he went forth with the scythe, and the nets, and the lines across his shoulder, and the hound following close in his path. He had strapped his gold about his waist, and he brought the dog with him. The hound's eyes

asked, with as much eloquence as human lips ever framed, to be allowed to seek out his mistress; but he was perfectly trained, and he understood at a glance that the time for his search of her had not yet come. As Erceldoune descended the steep incline of rock-steps, he glanced up at the lancet window at which yesterday he had seen the woman who was the single thought and idol of his life; she was not there. Though he knew nothing of it, her prison-chamber had been changed for one in which there was no casement—one to which light and air only strayed through by a score of circular holes pierced in the stonework, high above the reach of her gaze; a chamber on which no eyes could look, from which no cries could be heard. His heart sank at the dark vacancy which was alone seen through the bars, whence a few hours before her eyes had dwelt on him, from which she had watched him all through the length of the previous day. It was bitter work so to rein in his impulse, that he did not rush blindly into the den where she was hidden, and see what a sure shot and a merciless blow could do to free her. He choked the longing down as best he could; he knew there were eighty men there who would swing the ponderous gates to on him, and shut in with him for ever every chance

of rescue for her; he knew that the only hope for her, or for himself, lay in the course he now pursued; and he went out to his toil. There was abundance both of sport and of labour in those wild marshes and ill-preserved pools to have occupied for months one who brought to them the lore and the skill of Scottish moorlands, and he returned to them with unflagging pertinacity, mowing down the osiers, slinging the teal, and widgeon, and mallards, reckless of season so long as they served to fill the monks' buttery; stretching the nets and thrashing the sedges till the frightened fish swam in by the score; working through hour on hour till the Umbrian brought him his mess of breakfast-soup, and some tough cakes of rye, and sat down beside him under the stunted cypresses, gazing with devouring, delighted eyes at the stores of food laid upon the banks.

"Thanks, father; but that is a poor breakfast for either of us. See here; I have done better than you," said Erceldoune, as he stooped over a fire he had lit with the touchwood, and broke the clay covering off two succulent water-birds and half-a-dozen dainty trout, that he had baked in a sportsman's fashion, practised many a time in Canadian woods, and Kansas wilds, and Thuringian forests,

and Australian deserts. The eyes of the monk glittered with glee; he dearly loved savoury food, and abstinence was a sore trial to him.

"Eat of them as you will," said Erceldoune, as he laid them on the slab of rock that served as a table. "They are better than rye bread, at any rate; and if you fear the Brethren, not a soul can see you here. You seem very strict in your Order?"

The Umbrian sighed, and shook his little brown bullet head, while he betook himself to the precious banquet in silence.

"Yet you have a woman in your holy walls?"

He spoke abruptly; it was fearful to him to speak of her, and he could have better loved to force the answer out by a sterner mode than words.

The Umbrian started, and flushed guiltily.

"Nay, my son, you make a strange error. By all the saints of the calendar, nothing feminine ever——"

"Spare your perjuries, father. I saw her yonder."

He motioned his head backward to the frowning wall behind them; his pulses beat like sledge-hammers as he spoke.

The Umbrian hung his head, and hastily gobbled up a liver-wing.

"A delusion of the eye—a snare of the senses, my son. Maybe your thoughts run too much upon women."

Erceldoune swept the board bare of all the untasted fare.

"By my faith! you are a good comrade. I have brandy that will make you dream yourself in paradise, and we would have had a carouse with it to-night; but since you tell me such lies, when my own eyes saw her yonder, you shall have no drop of the cognac as long as you live, and every fish I have heaped on these banks I will fling back in the lakes again, and leave you to fill your own buttery as you best may!"

The Umbrian, terrified and aghast at what he had lost, seized the ends of his companion's sash imploringly:

"Oh, my son! do not be so rash. Set down the good food; to waste it is a sin. You did see her; you are right. But, for pity's sake, never breathe it."

"What is she, then?" asked Erceldoune, as he gave back the birds and trout, that had served him so well, into the eager hands of the monk. "And

why should you deny it? except that priests always deny any truth."

"She is a prisoner, and a rebel; and you should not blaspheme."

"Whose prisoner?"

"The king's, my son."

"The king's! Has he no prisons of his own, then, that he must borrow your convent?"

The Umbrian hesitated; he was sore afraid to answer the question, but he was more immediately afraid that his impetuous questioner should sweep his meal away again.

"Monsignore Villaflor is interested in her recovery to the One Faith, my son," he said, slowly and unwillingly.

"Giulio Villaflor!" The words leaped from his lips ere he knew they were spoken; the blood rushed into his face, his hands clenched; the name confirmed his worst horror, his worst dread. He knew the temper and the repute of the mighty Roman; he shivered where he stood in the hot sun.

"What do you know of our holy father in God, my son?"

Erceldoune turned his eyes full on him.

"What do *you* know?"

The other flushed shamefacedly; he was an

honest peasant in his way, to whom the mask of sanctity was very irksome, and the great ecclesiastic, and the uses to which the monastery was put, had alike cruelly gone against his simple instincts of a just life.

"You must not question me, my son; I know nothing—nothing save to obey the little I am ever told."

"What are you told of this captive, then?"

"That she is a sceptic and a revolutionist; a very evil and fatal woman."

"And his Holiness of Villaflor, out of his divine love, wishes to reclaim her into the bosom of the Church!"

The words were hot and acrid as they were hurled through his set teeth: it was all he could do to keep any chain on them.

The Umbrian winced under their sting.

"Surely, my son. It would be well that she should be reclaimed. But, of a truth——"

"What? Can a priest speak truth?"

"Hush, my son; you must not be so bitter upon the appointed of God. I was going to say"—the monk played restlessly with the savoury bones he had been crunching, and the colour burnt in his yellow cheek, as his voice sank low, and his eyes glanced

around furtively—"whether it was sorcery given her by the Evil One or no I cannot tell, but there was such a look in her eyes—ah, Madonna, she has a fearful beauty!—that when they bade me scourge her for contumacy, the lash dropped from my hands, I was as one paralysed. I could not. I could not!"

With a cry as though the scourge fell on him, cutting into the livid flesh, Erceldoune sprang to his feet; his hands fell on the Cistercian's shoulders swaying him to and fro.

"Scourged her?—scourged her? O God! they never dared——"

"I dared not," muttered the Umbrian, sorely in fear; "they were bitter upon me, but they did not force it—then. She will have the punishment to-morrow, if she have not yielded——"

"Yielded to what?"

"Yielded to the persuasions of the Church, my son."

Erceldoune flung him off with a force that made the Umbrian's blood run cold.

"Yielded to the passions of Giulio Villaflor, you mean! You hell-hounds!—you fiends!"

His voice choked in his throat; the muscles of his chest, where the fishing-shirt was open,

swelled convulsively; he felt blind with rage and agony;—the monk watched him in wonder.

"The sight of her beauty beyond those bars has stirred you strangely, my son. Verily, she is a sorceress, as they say. You feel marvellously for a strange woman."

Erceldoune shook in every limb with the effort to control what, betrayed, must betray both her and him.

"That she *is* a woman, and you are brutes, is enough! What man that had not the heart of a cur could hear such infamy and keep his peace? It is well the lash dropped from your hands, or I would have shaken life out of you where you stand!"

The Umbrian gave a shudder.

"Truly you could do it, for you are a son of Anak! I must leave you now; I am due with the Almoner; and as for that little matter of the brandy, I will come to your cell after supper, if you be still in the mind."

He made his way back with speed, anxious to get out of reach of this unchained lion; and Erceldoune stood alone in the hot sun-scorch, with shivers of fire and of ice, turn by turn, in his veins.

Whatever could be done for her must be done swiftly, or it would be too late.

Across the pitiless clearness of the transparent air there was alone in the arid wastes about him the figure of a pifferaro, a mere lad, singing a barcarolle, whose burden was borne musically and wildly over the marshes as he toiled on his way with his monkey on his shoulder. With lightning quickness, Erceldoune, keeping out of the sight of the monastery-casements, waded through shallow pools and dashed through thickets of osier, till he reached the boy, a bright-eyed, bright-witted Savoyard, with a dirty, tattered sheepskin for clothing, a little ape for a comrade, and a light childish heart that made him happier than a king. Erceldoune glanced at him, and saw both intelligence and frankness in the arch, brown, ruddy face of the little bohemian; he stopped him as the boy was leaping from tuft to tuft of the rank grass that studded the shaking quagmires, and stretched his hand out with a broad gold coin.

"Had you ever so much in your life?"

The Savoyard opened wider his keen, dancing, black eyes.

"Never! Of a truth, *signor barcarolo*, if that is the fish you angle out of these pools, your craft's a thriving one!"

"You shall get just such fish yourself if you choose.

Will you go on an errand for me? You shall have this coin as you start, if you will, and ten like it when you come back and show me the errand is done."

The pifferaro stretched out his little tanned hand.

"Give it here," he said, laconically. "The errand is done."

Erceldoune tossed him the gold.

"The errand is this. Do you know Ferratino?"

The boy nodded assent.

"Go thither, then; quick as a lapwing, straight as a crow flies. Run, as if you ran for your life. Take a paper I will give you to the villa, and say it is for his Excellency the Baron; he will send word by you, yes or no. Bring the word to me here, truly and instantly, and you shall have ten of those pieces, I promise you. Can you do the distance? It is far?"

The Savoyard laughed, his bright eyes all glittering with eager zest.

"I have done farther for a dozen bajocchi! You shall have your answer as fast as a pigeon could bring it. Give me the paper. I shall find you here?"

"Yes. On these waters. Wait a second while I write, and then be off like the wind."

As he spoke, he tore a leaf out of a pocket-book in which his circular notes had been sent from the yacht, and wrote with its pencil a few rapid lines; they were simply, in German:

"DEAR ANSELM,—I am in pressing need. Send me at nightfall two of the fastest horses you have; let some boy ride them who cannot speak a word of Italian, and wait with them, unseen, in the cypress grove under the monastery of Taverna—wait all night till he sees me. Do no more than I ask, for God's sake. I know I need not say grant my request; our alliance is too old and too sure. Forgive all that sounds strange and vague in this, and send me simply word, 'yes' or 'no,' by the Savoyard.

"Yours ever,

"FULKE ERCELDOUNE."

Men of his temperament make firm and warm friendships amongst men. The Hungarian noble to whom he wrote, and who, as he had remembered, occupied a villa some dozen miles from the wastes in which he stood, was a generous, reckless man of pleasure, who, he knew well, would have done far greater things than this at his entreaty, and would

have the sagacity to do as he asked, and no more. Ernst von Anselm and he had once passed through a mad night together on the burning decks of a ship in the midst of the broad Pacific, when mutiny and drunkenness in a Lascar crew had added their horrors to the pandemonium; and together, back to back, against a legion of devils, and in the red-hot glare of leaping flames, had sent their bullets through the ringleaders' brains, and saved the vessel alike from fire and from anarchy. From that hour they had been friends, true and close and tried, in that noble friendship of brethren, which is worth all the love of women.

The little pifferaro, flinging his ape over his shoulder, where it gripped a sure hold, darted off, over the dreary plain, as he had promised, as fast as a pigeon could fly: that broad gold coin locked in his hand, and the promise of ten more like it, lent him the speed of a desert pony. "I shall go back a millionnaire to my people!" thought the child in his glee. There was hardly so much money in the whole of the little hamlet that had given him birth, where it nestled in a sleepy hollow under the brown hills of Savoy.

Erceldoune looked after him a second,—the careless child was a frail little basket-boat to launch on

such stormy waters weighted with the fate of two lives! Then he went back to the work of the monastery, labouring all through the noon-heat among the sedges and the still, shallow, yellow lagunes—working as men only work when in that ardour of physical toil, that restless bodily exertion, they give vent to the thoughts which, if they paused to muse a moment, would unman and madden them. He felt as if the hours would never move; the sun seemed to stand still; the blazing radiance of the day had a sickening oppression;—what might she not be bidden to suffer in it!

He knew the temper of Giulio Villaflor, that leopard of the velvet skin and of the unsparing fangs. He shuddered as he looked on the rugged silent pile, that kept her chained for such a tyrant. He had never fancied that the world could hold such agony as those burning, endless, intolerable hours brought him, as he plunged down eagerly into the coolness of the waters to chill the torture in him, and laboured to kill thought under the burden of corporeal fatigue, under the fever of ceaseless activity.

The day grew on; noon came and passed; the glow of light lay clear and golden over the plains, and the breadth of the sheeted water; the hours

were tolled monotonously from the campanila, ever and again the drone of the monks' voices rising in regular diapason, in chant or office, swelled through the narrow apertures of their chapel casements, and echoed with melancholy rise and fall over the silence. When he heard it, deadlier oaths than his lips had ever breathed were hurled over the slumbering pools at the priestly formulas that sheltered a Nero's cruelties, a Borgia's lusts. Once or twice a peasant or a muleteer passed across the horizon line: otherwise there was nothing to break the eternal sameness of the glittering sunlight, the sear country, the cypress points cutting so sharply against the intense blue of the sky. He knew what men had felt who had lost their reason through a captivity that made them dwell in one unending solitude—look on one unchanging scene.

The deep radiance of colour that precedes the sunset was just flushing earth and sky, as the shrill hoot of an owl's note pierced his ear—a night-bird's cry in the sunshine. He guessed at once that it was a signal of the little pifferaro, and followed it. Under the reeds, some half mile or less from the monastery, the boy was crouched, panting like a tired dog, but glowing with life and zest and eagerness as he lifted his hot brown face.

"I have done it," he cried, with all a child's exultation. "Here is your answer—written. Stay here, lest the crows yonder should spy on us. Let priests smell gold, and it's all up with him who owns it."

Erceldoune took the paper and read it, lying there under the shelter of the sedges. It was in German; the Baron was from home, but an old lacquey, who had chanced to be the first to greet the Savoyard, seeing an open scroll, and, pressed by the boy's urgency, had read it, had hesitated at first what to do in his master's absence, but, knowing how well Anselm loved the writer, had known he should run no risk by compliance, and might by refusal risk much displeasure. He wrote now in reply, with sagacity and foresight, promising that the horses should be in waiting at nightfall with a lad to hold them, and that as they would be something worn by the transit, another pair should be in readiness at the gates of Ferratino in case Erceldoune's errand should bear him near, which in all likelihood it might, since all things must pass by there to reach the road to the shore.

His hand shook with joy as he read, and scattered the old man's tremulously-written characters in fragments lest they should tell tales. So far the

means for flight were secured, could her freedom be compassed. He had not much gold about him, but he gave double the fee to the little pifferaro, while the child stared in amaze at the twenty shining yellow pieces. He caught them greedily, yet when he had them he was half stupefied with the enormity of his possessions.

"The pastor, and the bailiff, and the innkeeper never had more than that all put together!" he murmured, his thoughts drifting to the village of his birth, with its little steeple hidden under chestnut leaves, and its mild-eyed herds browsing on the green breadths between the rocks. "That is no *barcarolo;* and, whatever the mischief is, I will be bound there is a woman in it," considered the shrewd little lad as he went on his way, the gold safe in the bosom of his sheepskin shirt.

With the dead mallards and teal flung over his shoulder, and with a great osier-basket of fish filled to overflowing, Erceldoune passed, unsummoned, from the lake side up the rock, and to the monastery gates. He thought they might make question of letting him enter for a second night's lodging, and without entrance all hope of her rescue was ended. The Umbrian, however, who through the grating saw the abundance brought in for the larder,

admitted him instantly, with many praises of his industry and adorations of his skill.

"You have a heavy door there?" said Erceldoune, turning to glance at the ponderous mass of iron-clamped oak that swung slowly behind him.

"Ah—heavy indeed!" sighed the Benedictine, as he stooped to draw the huge bolts, which were only drawn stiffly and with effort into their sockets. "It is heavy enough, but it is these are the misery."

"These? I will soon make them run smoother. I have something of a smith's skill. Fetch me a file and a little oil."

The Umbrian fetched them gladly, marvelling what manner of man this was who knew every craft under the sun. A little while, and the rusted iron bolts ran noiselessly and smoothly in their massive channels; the monk's lament had given him an opportunity more precious than any other could have been in that moment, and in easing the run of the bolts for the gatekeeper's indolence, he paved the way to a facile exit by night from the monastery, if by any means he could also obtain the great key that swung from the Umbrian's girdle.

"You have a wonderful science, my son," said

the Cistercian, with musing amaze. "You can do all things that you turn your hand to it seems!"

"I have lived in many countries and with many men."

"You must have been more than a mere *barcarolo*, my son?"

"I told you I have been a 'wanderer' from my birth," said Erceldoune, with a smile at the play on the Celtic meaning of his nationality. "The career is a bad one for gold, but it is the best in the world, I fancy, for learning self-help and other men's virtues."

"But you must learn much vice too, my son?"

Erceldoune shrugged his shoulders.

"What of that? Vice is a good teacher too, in its way, and one must take the warp with the woof."

"But, you know, one cannot touch pitch, my son, and keep undefiled."

Erceldoune laughed a little.

"Good father, where is the man that ever did keep so? And as for that, the pitch will not stay long unless the surface be ready for it. But, for Heaven's sake, chatter no more; I love speech little at any time, and now—I am famished."

"Truly you have earned your supper; and—as for that little matter of brandy? I have not tasted a drop since I was in Naples, seven seasons ago!"

"All right, I have the best cognac in a flask here; if you come to my cell after supper, you shall be heartily welcome to a draught of it."

The monk's eyes sparkled with glee; he nodded a hasty assent, and, relieving his guest of the fish and the birds, took him for the second time to the refectory. The same silence, the same rigour, the same fare prevailed; the same double line of lean immutable, saturnine, emaciated faces were in the dim light of the stone hall; the same swift upward glance was cast on him as he entered; the same abstracted severity of repose was observed throughout the meal. He had no wish to break it; only for her sake could he so far restrain the hatred in him towards the men who were her torturers and her captor's tools, as to share their bread, justly as he had earned it, and to sit in such semblance of amity with them as lay in this compulsory companionship. Some among them noted that there was a dark shadow on the strange *barcarolo's* face that had not been there so deeply on the previous day, and the monk nearest him heard a heavy oath

muttered under the waves of his beard when the blessing before the refection was chanted;—it was a curse on those who covered the lusts of a velvet-voiced-priest with the savour of sanctity, with the odour of rituals. Often, moreover, his passionate eyes flashed over the countenances around him, seeking to read by instinct which amongst them was the brute who had dared bid the lash be raised against her: had he known, scarce every memory of the prudence and the abstinence needful for her sake would have availed to chain back his arm from a blow that would have felled the offender level with the flags of the stone floor.

The meal ended, a fresh torture waited him; the Superior summoned him to the head of the table, and held a long converse with him, the rambling verbosity of old age combined, in the incessant vagaries of his interrogation, with the subtle veiled promptings of curiosity and cunning. There was that in the bearing and the glance of the stranger they harboured which made the priests uneasily suspect that this was too bold a lion for their episcopal lord to welcome were he aware of the shelter they gave. Erceldoune saw the suspicion, and saw that he must allay it, or all hope of sufficient freedom for the purpose he held would be for ever denied him.

With an effort which cost him far more than any physical toil or bodily strain could have ever done, he forced himself into the part it was imperative to play. Lie he would not, not even for her; and reserve, he saw, would confirm all the doubts rising in the breasts of his gaolers and auditors; he cast himself into a bolder venture. "These men," he reckoned, with a swift glance over them, "must be of two classes only—those who have forsaken the world, and those who have never known it; to hear of it will enchain equally those for whom it is a lost land and those to whom it is an unknown one." On that rapid inference he acted. In answer to the Superior's questions he told his life frankly; changing it in little, save that they deemed his travel had been the travel of a restless bohemian—a man poor enough to have been glad at times to serve before the mast.

Though he was averse to many words usually, he could speak with a vivid and impressive eloquence when the fire of it was struck alight in him. He forced himself to speak so here. He answered, as one who would tell his adventures, without pressure or comment; and after the brevity of his previous curt replies, the monks heard the picturesque flow of his swift Italian with the same

amaze with which they regarded the stature, the strength, the sweeping beard, and the careless royalty of bearing of this athlete, who came amongst them as though to show them all that this manhood, which they had crucified and buried in their own lives as an unholy and accursed thing, might be and might enjoy. His past had been full of ever-changing scenes and experiences; hair-breadth escapes, desperate dangers, wild adventure, and keen perils, had been continually his portion in the distant and intricate missions on which he was sent. A struggle of life and death in the heart of Persia had been followed by dreamy barbaric luxury and magnificence in the midst of Mexican palaces; a death-ride through Russian snow-storms, with the baying pack of starving wolves on his track through the whole of a bitter icy night, had been succeeded by months of gaiety in the capitals of Europe; a shipwreck in the midst of the Indian Ocean, with a Malay crew ripe for murder, and an open boat living for days on tempestuous seas in the glare of a tropic sun, with men around him dying like dogs for water, had been effaced almost as soon as endured by the brilliant fiery pleasures of a volunteer service with the French cavalry in a campaign against the Arabs; or a desert quest for desert game over the

wild Libyan tracts in the sultry glories of autumn days and nights, by a season's sojourn in some friend's summer-palace among the roses of Damascus, or in the ruby glow of the Nile suns, painting, shooting, swimming, boating; finding ever and everywhere the happiness of fearless, fetterless, vivid life, oftentimes nomadic, and glad in the mere gladness of strength, in the mere desert chief's sense of liberty, with

> " the rich dates yellow'd over with gold-dust divine,
> And the locust's flesh steep'd in the pitcher, the full draught of wine,
> And the sleep in the dried river channel, where bulrushes tell
> That the water was wont to go warbling so softly and well."

The memories even of a single year supplied him with a thousand sources from which to draw pictures of varied scenes, whose recital entranced imperceptibly and unconsciously first one and then another of his auditors, till the whole circle of the monks stood around as men in the East will stand around the narrator who tells of far countries and of strange fortunes, while the narghilé vapours out, and the coffee steams fragrantly in the open divan, and the grave Mussulmans stroke their beards in silent wonder.

It entranced them, this recital of worlds un-

known, and of joys as of dangers undreamed of by them. When he paused, the Father Superior pressed him eagerly for more; those bold, terse, picturesque words that drew them sketches of different lands and unimagined pleasures with the same rich vigorous sweep as that with which his hand would paint tropic foliage and mountain outline, the stretch of seas and the burning warmth of sun-tanned prairie, held the priestly circle spell-bound. Those who had known no existence save that of the cloister from their youth up, heard with an entranced, stupefied amaze, as children hear tales of genii; those who had come to the cloister only when every hope of life had been bruised, and wrung, and killed, heard with a terrible pained look of hunger on their faces, as exiles hear a strain of melody which brings them back the songs of the land they have lost for ever. Both alike hung on the swift flow of the descriptive words, only more warmly coloured by the Neapolitan idiom he still employed, as on some tale of paradise; the worn sallow cheeks flushed, the deadened lustreless eyes flashed, the dropped veiled glance was lifted eagerly, the thin and silent lips were parted with rapid breaths, and once a sigh broke from a monk still in the years of youth—a sigh so

bitter, so intense in its anguish of vain lament, that a whole broken, wasted life seemed spent in it.

Never again would they be as they had been ere this wanderer had come amidst them; through him they saw all that they had lost for ever.

He had conquered them. When they parted, and he went on his way to his cell, there was not a doubt of him lingering in any heart, there was not a man who had one thought left with him save of that glory of manhood, that splendour of liberty, that beauty of unknown worlds, which they had voluntarily surrendered and buried from themselves till the death of the grave should release them from the death of the monastery.

"Come," he whispered, as he passed the Umbrian, "and if you can bring lemons, sugar, and spices with you, you shall dream yourself in paradise to-night."

"Hush, my dear son; do not be so profane!" murmured the other, while his eyes danced in expectant ecstasy. "I will come, and bring the things, if I can, from the buttery. Your tales were beautiful, but I thought the Superior would never have let you go!"

"Great Heaven! to save my own life I would not stoop to dupe and bribe these brutes as I do for

hers!" thought Erceldoune, where he leaned on the stone ledge of his cell-window awaiting the monk. It was very bitter to him, this truce with her enemies, this false play with these ecclesiastics. The soldier-like frankness and the proud honesty of his nature rebelled irrepressibly at the dissimulation he was driven to match them with thus. To lead a charge through the heat of battle, as he had done in Mexico and Algeria more than once, when the chiefs had been shot down, or to imperil his life against all odds in a deadly contest with overpowering numbers, as had chanced to him in Persian defiles and Argentine revolutions, was far more suited to his temper and his instincts than the part that, for her sake, fell to him in these cloisters of Taverna. Yet played out the part must be, or she would be beyond rescue, beyond hope.

It was not long before the Umbrian made his stealthy entrance, with the treasures of the buttery hidden under his frock.

Erceldoune in silence took the things from him. His own flask was large and full of brandy, strong as fire and mellow as oil; he emptied out half the water of his pitcher, tossed the whole of the cognac in instead, and with the spices, lemons, and sugar, made a fragrant and intoxicating drink. The Um-

brian, squatted on the dry grasses of the bed, watched its preparation with thirsty, devouring eyes.

"He will be dead drunk before this is half empty," thought Erceldoune.

"There, tell me if that is not better than sour wines and rancid goat's milk," he asked, as he poured some into the little drinking-horn the monk had brought. It was swallowed in an ecstasy; the Umbrian had no need to dream of paradise, he was in it the moment the strong, odorous draught touched his lips. As fast as he stretched the horn out, so fast his host filled it; the pitcher held more than a quart, and Erceldoune scarcely drank himself, though he made a feint of so doing; he did not yet know how much or how little would be needed to steep the Italian in the slumberous intoxication he required to produce. As he had imagined, the first few draughts rose straight to the brain of the recluse, who, well as he loved it, had not tasted any alcohol for years; the luscious, fiery, highly-spiced liquid quickly flushed his face, and whirled his thoughts, and loosened his always loquacious tongue; he sat with the jovial content of a Sancho Panza, laughing, chattering, heeding very little what replies he had, and very rapidly forgetting all things except

the tender of his horn for its replenishing. Erceldoune sought first to make him garrulous, so that he might glean intelligence from his drunken verbiage. The Umbrian's idle tergiversation of speech soon wandered off to the captive of their clerical bondage—wandered to such ardent maudlin ecstasies on the subject of her beauty that his hearer suffered tortures as he listened perforce to the profanation. Erceldoune flung himself down on the flag floor, resting on his elbow, in such enforced stillness as he could command, while the rambling fervour of the gluttonous Brother desecrated her name and catalogued her charms; happily, the drinker was too giddy with his potations to notice the shudder that every now and then at his hottest epithets of descriptive admiration shook his listener's limbs, or the flash that darted over him from his hearer's eagle eyes when he betrayed, in his unconscious loquacity, the purpose of her imprisonment in the Cistercian sanctuary.

It needed no questions to elicit all he knew; the brandy fumes rising over his brain undid all caution it had ever been taught, and spread out all its shreds of knowledge as a pedlar spreads his wares. Erceldoune heard enough to convulse him with horror as he was stretched there on the naked

stone, with the lustre of the Italian night finding its way dimly through the aperture above;—enough to know that he must rescue her to-night, or never.

"And I will tell you more," hiccuped the monk, laughing low and cunningly, too blind with drink to have much knowledge left of whom he spoke to, or of where he was. "Monsignore comes to-night—he often visits us, you know; we are his special children, and it has a fair odour for so great a man to leave the world for such holy, rigorous retirement!"

"To-night!"

Erceldoune sprang to his feet as a lion springs from its lair; the priest's villanous chuckle rang like a rattlesnake in his ear; in his cups the Umbrian was but an animal—a very low one to boot—and the better instincts which had moved him when the lash had dropped from his hand were drowned and dead.

"Ay, to-night!" laughed the monk, while his head hung on one side, and his eyes closed with the fatuous cunning of intoxication; "he comes for the last time—do you mark me?—for the last time!"

The oath that shook the stone walls thrilled even

through the mists of drink and the imbecility of his dulled brain, as it was hurled from his hearer's lips; an agony was in it such as mere grief never spoke yet. The Umbrian, sobered by it for the moment, shuddered and strove to rise, looking about him with blind, terrified eyes.

"What have I said? What have I done?" he muttered, piteously. "Ah, Jesu! Monsignore—Monsignore!"

And with that last dread name on his lips he fell back stupefied, rocking himself to and fro, and sobbing like a child.

Erceldoune neither saw nor heard him; he stood like a statue, his hands clenched, his face dyed crimson, the black veins swollen on his forehead and his throat, his breath caught in savage, stifled gasps, his bared chest heaving like the flanks of a snared animal.

"To-night!—to-night!"

The words rattled in his chest with a curse that would have chilled even the bold blood of his mighty rival.

The Umbrian sat motionless, staring at him with distended, senseless eyes; he was filled with a great terror, but the terror was vague, and his mind seemed to swim in vapour. Erceldoune cast one

glance at him, and by sheer instinct forced the vessel, still half-filled with the liquid, into his hands.

"Drink!" he said, fiercely; "drink, and be a beast at once."

The monk, with whom there was but one sense left, that of desire for the alcohol that destroyed him, seized it thirstily, and drank—drank—drank—till the fiery stream flowed down his throat like water. Erceldoune watched him with eager, aching eyes; every moment seemed an eternity, every thought maddened him till he felt like a desert brute; he could not stir till this priest lay senseless before him.

He paced the narrow limits of his cell like a caged lion, his face dark as night, his heart panting till its throbs sounded through the stillness, his breast heaving till the loose light folds of the fishing-shirt felt like a case of iron, his gaze never leaving the obese wavering figure of the stupefied Italian, who followed his movement with a dizzy, blinded sight that grew dimmer and dimmer with every moment that the brandy rose over his brain like waves that washed all lingering sense away.

At last the pitcher dropped with a crash from

hands that lost all power; a vacuous laugh sounded a moment in the Umbrian's throat; his eyes stared senselessly at the slender silver cimeter of the young moon that shone through the slit of the casement, then their lids closed, his head fell back, he lay like a log of wood on the pallet—unconscious, sightless, dead drunk.

Erceldoune stooped over him, and forced his eyelids up; by the look of the eyeballs beneath he saw that this was no feint, but the deep-drugged sleep of intoxication that would be unbroken for a score of hours, whose stupor made the man it had enchained powerless as a stone, brainless as a hog, deaf to all sound, insensible of all existence;—he wanted no more.

With his knife he slashed noiselessly the band of the great keys that swung at the monk's girdle, and fastened them on his own, so muffled that they would make no sound as he moved. He looked at his pistols, and put them back in his sash ready sprung; they were double-barrelled revolvers, that carried sure death in their tubes. Then he laid his hand on the hound's collar, led him without, closed the door, and drew its bolts, locking in the Umbrian.

The dormitory was quite dark; not even the

moon's rays strayed into its narrow black aisle of stone, with the double line of cells flanking its length; a single footfall overheard, a single echo sounding down the silence, and the sleeping monks would pour out of their lairs upon him. While waiting, he had bound his feet with withes of hay, so that they fell noiselessly on the pavement; and the hound stole softly on, as he had been bred to steal on a roebuck's slot or a brigand's track. The first thing Ercèldoune sought was to make the road free to leave the building; he found his way, that he had carefully noted as he came, back to the great entrance. The whole place was still; there was not a sound; he passed uninterruptedly to the vaulted gate-passage. Here a single oil-lamp burned, its light dully shed on the broad low oak door, with its iron cramps and fastenings. He drew back the bolts gently, and turned the keys in the two ponderous locks; the door would open now at a touch. He motioned to the hound to wait and guard it; the dog understood the trust, and couched motionless as though cast in bronze; a truer or a bolder sentinel could not be placed there, and it was not for the first time that the brave sagacious Servian monarch had been trusted in a crisis of life or death. Then rapidly, and with the light swift tread of a deer,

Erceldoune retraced his steps; he had but the shadowy, rambling information of the monk to guide him to where Idalia was, but he knew, by that, that she was in the westward wing of the monastery, and he made his way there through the thick darkness about him, and down the stone passages winding one in another. It was all so still; he thought the story of the drunken Italian must have been a drink-inspired dream.

And yet—men who came for shame would come in silence and in secret; his hand was on his pistols as he went, his limbs shook as he traversed the interminable gloom, a hot joy, a terrible torture, were on him; he went to save her—and he might be too late.

He had found his way into what, as far as he could judge, was the western part close on the chapel which the Umbrian had spoken of as the place of her fresh lodgment. Here, also, the darkness was unbroken; he could not pierce it to see a yard in advance; he felt the rough cold stone of the wall against his hand; he felt by the greater chillness of the air that no ray of daylight ever penetrated; he paused a moment, tempted at all risk of discovery to return and fetch the dog to track her. At that instant his eyes caught a faint narrow

thread of light, pale and close to the floor—the light, doubtless, of a chamber within glimmering above the door-sill; he made his way towards it, careless what hand might be stretched out to arrest his course; before he reached it, the sweet imperial tones of a voice that thrilled him like an electric touch rang through the solitude:

"Back!—or your life or mine ends. It matters little which!"

The voice was clear as a bell and rich as music, but it vibrated with a meaning that struck like steel to the heart of the man who loved her;—it told him all.

With the force of a giant he threw himself against the door, guided to it by the light that gleamed beneath against the stones. Passion lent him herculean strength; the bar within was drawn, but the weight of his pressure suddenly flung on the panels sent both bolts and sockets back, wrenched from their fastenings, while the wood was shivered beneath the crash, and a dusky yellow light flared in his eyes from the cell within.

Across the broken half of the door, still jammed by its staples to the floor, he saw Idalia; such light as there was, was on her where she stood close pressed to the bare stone wall, upon her face loathing and

scorn unutterable, yet even now no touch of fear; the rich-hued draperies of her masque-dress were torn, as though she had just wrenched herself free from some polluting grasp; her hair was loosened, and against her bosom she held clenched the blade of the Venetian stiletto, its point turned inward against her heart. Above her stood her great tyrant's lofty form.

As the bolts broke, and the splintered beechwood flew in fragments, Giulio Villaflor swept round, his forehead red, his eyes alight with a Borgia's fury of baffled and licentious love—an amazed rage on him at the stranger who dared stand between him and his captive, between him and his will. With one glance, in which his gaze met hers, and with a lion's spring, Erceldoune was on the mighty Prelate, his hand at the other's throat, as a forest hound's fangs fasten in a wolf's; the shock of the sudden collision dragged the Italian back staggering and breathless ere he heard or saw his antagonist. Then that sheer blood-instinct woke in Villaflor which wakes with the first sense of conflict in all men not cowards from their birth; he closed with this unknown foe, whose gripe was at his throat, holding him powerless.

Not a word was breathed, yet both knew—

strangers though they were—that they met thus but for her sake. It was the work of an instant, yet to the Neapolitan it seemed long as half a life, that struggle in which the lightning swoop of his unseen enemy swept him from his prey, and bore down on him with the might of vengeance, in the silence of the night which he had thought had veiled his tyranny and his crime from all eyes. No living man had ever crossed the will or the passions of the great prelate until now that he was seized as lions seize in the death-grapple.

They were almost perfectly matched; equal in strength as in stature, though in one a life of adventure and hardihood had braced all that in the other a life of effeminate indulgence had enervated. Giulio Villaflor beneath his sacerdotal robes had a warrior's frame and a warrior's soul; many a time, hearing of battle-fields and soldier's perils, he had longed to gird a sword on his loins and go down in the van to the slaughter; and as the gripe of Erceldoune's hand fastened on his throat, and the gleam of his enemy's eyes flashed suddenly into his, the desert rage, the desert courage, roused in the silken soft-footed panther of the Church. In the lamp-lit cell, under the black vaulted roof, in the hush of the midnight-silenced monastery,

they wrestled together in that wild-beast conflict, which makes the men who are maddened by it savage and bloodthirsty as the beasts whose ferocity they share.

Such feeble flickering light as there was in the dungeon shone on the majestic figure of the priest clothed in the dark floating robes of the Church, and the athletic form of his foe, in the white loose linen dress of the Capriote sailors, as breast to breast, face to face, with their lofty limbs twined like gladiators, and their hands at each other's throats, they swayed, and reeled, and rocked to and fro, in that deadly embrace. It was the work of scarce twenty seconds; yet in it they rent and tore at each other as lion and leopard may do in the yellow dust of a tropic dawn, when long famine has made both ravenous for blood, and each beast knows that he must conquer and kill, or feel the fangs plough down into heart and flanks, and his own life pour out for ever. The prelate, who, ere now, had never even known a hand too roughly brush his sacred person, sought only to fling off the grasp that strangled him; his foe, rife with revenge and burning with a rival's hate, could have torn his heart out where they wrestled in as mortal a combat as ever was that with which retiarius and secutor

reddened the white sand of Augustan amphitheatres.

A moment, and the hardier strength, the leonine force, of Erceldoune, so often tested in victory under the red foliage of Canadian forests and the scorching suns of African skies, conquered; he crushed the priest in his sinewy arms till the chest-bones bent, and the breath was stifled, as in the gripe of the Arctic bear; then, with one last effort he swung the Italian off, and raising him by the waist, flung him with all his might downward on to the stone floor, the limbs falling with a dull, crushing, breaking sound as they were dashed against the granite.

Thrown so that his head smote the flags with a shock like iron meeting iron, Villaflor fell insensible, the force with which he was tossed outward stunning his senses, and throwing him a bruised, motionless, huddled mass in the gloom of the dusky cell. The proud and princely ecclesiastic lay powerless, silenced, broken, helpless, like a dead cur, in the heart of the monastery where his word was law, and his will absolute as any sovereign's.

His foe stood above him, his foot on the prostrate throat, that swelled and grew purple with the suffocated breath, the stifled blood. He had lost all

memory save the sheer animal impulse to slaughter and avenge; and his heel ground down on to Giulio Villaflor's neck, treading out life till the rich lips of the Neapolitan gasped in unconscious torture, and the olive tint of his bold smooth brow grew black as the full veins throbbed and started beneath the skin.

One pressure more, and the last pulse of existence would have been crushed out where he lay, with his teeth clenched and his senseless eyes staring upwards:—the touch that could lead him where it would, as a child, fell lightly on her avenger's arm. Idalia's voice thrilled him with its sweet brief words:

"Wait! *You* are too brave for that. He is fallen; let him lie."

Her gaze dwelt on him, full, humid, eloquent, speaking her gratitude far more deeply than by words. Breathless, victorious, with the war-lust in his eyes, and his heart panting under the bruised muscles and the aching sinews of the chest to which his enemy had been strained in so deadly an embrace, Erceldoune turned and looked at the woman for whose sake he had fought, as a hound, called off from the throat of the thief he has pulled down, looks at the master whom he obeys, even whilst he

longs to disobey, and serve him, and revenge him, with the death-gripe.

He took his heel off the neck of Giulio Villaflor.

"As you will."

His voice shook over the simple words; his face flushed hotly to the very temples as, for the first time, he met her gaze; his eyes searched hers, thirstily wistful, wildly eager.

"Come, for the love of God! You trust me?"

"As I never trusted any."

She stretched out to him, as she spoke, her fettered hands that, even chained, had found strength in them to hold the slender blade that would have sheathed itself in her heart or her tyrant's. There was that in the action which, even in such a moment, made him feel faint and blind with hope. It repaid him all—would have repaid him his death-stroke, had he laid dying at her feet.

For all answer he crushed the steel links that hung, holding her wrists powerless, in the grasp which had stifled Giulio Villaflor, and bent and wrenched and twisted them with the same force as that by which he had once torn off an Indian boar from its writhing human prey; the chain broke and fell asunder.

His eyes, as they looked up to hers, spoke a

meaning to which her own heart answered as flame leaps to the touch of a torch.

"We will have *one* freedom—the freedom of death, if not of life!"

She knew all that the whisper meant; knew that he might be powerless to give her the liberty of existence, but that he would give her the liberty of the grave—and share it.

As the links of her fetters broke, a rush, an alarm, a tumult, were borne down the silence from the distant corridors; the monks had awakened, and found, either their stranger-guest absent or their bolted gates unloosed. Those doors once freshly closed, those sleepers once aroused from their countless cells, and every avenue of escape would be sealed, every chance of flight ended for ever.

Without a pause for breath, without a glance at the fallen form of the great churchman, without sense or memory of the aching sinews and the bruised nerves that throbbed in heavy pain across his own breast, where the strength of his foe had dealt him blows that had rained down like an iron hammer on an iron plate, he drew his pistol with one hand, while with the other he held her close against him.

"We will beat them yet!" he said, in his teeth,

that were clenched like the strong fangs of a mastiff. He was a soldier at the core; all a soldier's daring, all a soldier's war-fire, rose in him, as with him alone lay her defence, her liberty, her life.

With the swiftness of a moorland deer he plunged out into the passage beyond, and dashed down the windings of the narrow ways. The darkness was like the depth of midnight, and the first false step might fling them like broken birds upon the wall that towered on either side, or down the sheer descent of the granite stairs that ever and again at intervals led into the unknown horrors of the underground crypt and vaults. Yet, as he bore her onward through the rayless, treacherous blackness, fierce joy was on him: for her pleasures, and her riches, and her brilliance, half the world might be her comrades and her candidates, but he alone shared her danger. In her prosperity so many had been round her; in her extremity he had no rival.

The rush of feet, the clamour of voices, the tremulous utterance of vague alarm pierced shrilly and incessantly from the farther end of the building the dead silence of the night. From the broken cries which reached him, he could tell that the priests

knew nothing as yet of the fall of their great leader, but had been awakened by the noise of the far-off conflict, and had discovered his absence and the Umbrian's drunken sleep. But one chance remained —the single chance of reaching the entrance-hall before they searched there for him.

"Can you fire?" he whispered, as he bore her onward and outward to where the feeble lamplight gleamed yellow and faint in the passages he had traversed.

In answer, her hand glided over the barrel of his weapon, and closed on the butt firmly.

"My life has hung on my own shot before now."

There was no tremor in her own tones as she replied to him; there was only the calm valour that thrilled him as a clarion thrills the soldier who hears its silvery melody command him to face death and to deal it.

"Promise me one thing?" she murmured.

There was light enough now, grey and dusky as it was, for him to see her eyes as they looked up to his, the gold gleam of her hair against his breast, the glisten of the steel blade against her bosom.

"All things."

"Then, if we are outnumbered, keep the last shot for me, and *take sure aim.*"

A mortal anguish quivered through him; he knew it might well prove that this boon, and this only, would be all that he could do to rescue or obey her.

"The last but one," he answered. "The last shall bring me to you."

The words were brief, and had the noble simplicity of his own nature in them; blent with a high devotion that held her honour dearer yet than all her beauty, and would obey her will even unto this last night of all. He had loved her ere now as dogs love, as slaves love, as men love whose passions can make them madmen, dotards, fools; but with that hour he loved her more grandly, more deeply, with a passion that sank into her heart, and stirred it as the storm winds stir the sea; that, for the first time in all the years in which this insanity had been roused by her and lavished on her, moved her to reverence what she ruled, to feel the strength, the depth, the force of this life that she, and she alone, could break as a child breaks reeds. She was silent; she let herself be borne by him through the twilight; she, too, felt a lulling sweetness, a subtle charm, in that breathless passage through the

gloom, whose only goal might be the grave. She, too, felt something of that dreamy sorcery which lies in the one word—"together."

Nearing them came the clamour of the shrill Italian voices; behind them, from the cell where Giulio Villaflor was stretched senseless, the shouts of those who found their lord lie dying as they deemed, rang the alarm through the whole monastery, till the stones echoed with the outcry. From the stillness of slumber and the drowsy monotone of prayer, the whole silence teemed with noise and tumult; the whole building was alive with men, who started from their first stupor of sleep in vague terror and senseless excitation, while above all thundered the roll of the hound's bay, attacked at his post and giving challenge to his menacers.

"If he can guard the gates, we are free!"

The cry broke from her with the agony of a prayer as they pressed on into the great hall, where the single swinging entrance lamp burned dully through night and day. Hope almost died in him as he saw the crowd of monks that filled it, while before the unbarred door the dog couched like a lion ready to spring, with his mane erect, and his eye-balls red with fire, and his mighty teeth gleaming white under his black-bearded muzzle, holding

them so at bay that none dared be the first to pass him and swing to afresh the unloosed bolts and chains. They forgot the hound as they saw the prisoner of their Church, and rushed on to her with a shrill yell. There were men among them who had flung the priestly robes over lives of foul crimes and unsuccessful villanies; and men who had hated her for that mere feminine forbidden loveliness that here, in their stone-locked den, they never looked on; and men who would have killed her, were it only that such service might find them fair favour in the eyes of the great dignitary, who held their fates in the hollow of his hand. These threw themselves headlong towards Erceldoune as he came out of the darkness of the corridor into the entrance-square, low-roofed and broad, with the arch of the door filling its farther end.

He paused, and levelled his pistol full in the eyes of the foremost.

"Let me pass, or you are dead men."

END OF VOL. II.

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